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Making Sense of Sex and Faith:
An Exercise in Poetic Practical Theology

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of
the University of Chester for the degree of
Doctor of Professional Studies (DProf) in Practical Theology

by Carla A. Grosch-Miller

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Summary of Portfolio.....	6
Introduction	8
<i>Invocation: Into the Borderlands</i>	<i>8</i>
“ <i>What’s It All About?</i> ”	8
Search and Rescue	10
Mapping the Terrain.....	10
Part One: Poetic Practical Theology	13
Chapter 1: Poetry as Way-marker and Way-maker	13
Borderlands: Liminality and Poetry	14
How Poetry Creates It.....	15
Imagination, Play and Poetry.....	17
Silence and Poetry	19
Chapter 2: Poetics as Method and Model in Practical Theology	22
2.1 Writing the Body: Experience as a Source for Theology	23
2.2 Poetics and the Remaking of Tradition.....	30
Part Two: The Poesis of Story, Self and Sex.....	40
Chapter 3: Mind the Gap	42
Storied Lives.....	43
Sex, Self and Story.....	46
Chapter 4: Shhh!!.....	49
Engaging Silence.....	49
The Big Secret: Sex in the Church	52
Chapter 5: The Story of Sex	56
Storying Sex.....	57

The Veritas of Sex	60
Chapter 6: Storytelling, A Research Methodology.....	62
Framing Story: Methodological Foundations	64
Story-Seeking: Research Methods	65
Auto-Contributions	67
Reading Between the Lines: Data Analysis.....	70
Thesis Poesis.....	72
Measuring Success.....	73
Part Three: The Phenomenology of Formation	76
Chapter 7: Moral Creativity	79
Chapter 8: I Am and I Can – The <i>Telos</i> of Identity and Agency	85
8.1 Developing a Sense of Self: Sexual and Body Awareness.....	85
8.2 Agency: The Knowing and Valuing of Self	92
8.3 Direction and Dynamism: Identity/Agency and Relationship.....	99
Chapter 9: Encountering Others – The <i>Telos</i> of Relationship.....	102
9.1 The Vulnerable ‘I’.....	103
9.2 Cleaving	107
9.3 Pro-Creating.....	110
Chapter 10: Wrestling Angels.....	112
10.1 Wrestling the Angel of Scripture and Tradition.....	112
10.2 Wrestling the Angel of Communitas.....	118
10.3 Wrestling the Angel of Other as Self.....	132
Part Four: Resourcing Sexual-Spiritual Integration – Forming	
Faithfulness, Teaching Treasure	137
Chapter 11: Formation vs. Integration.....	140
Chapter 12: Reflexivity in Poetic Phronesis.....	143

Liberating Tacit, Subjugated Knowledge.....	146
Shaping Ethos	148
Chapter 13: Andragogies of Integration	151
“The Grace of Great Things”	152
The Poesis of Wisdom: Liminal Conversations.....	155
Assuming the Mantle	159
Conclusion	161
<i>Benediction</i>	164
Bibliography	165

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MAKING SENSE OF SEX AND FAITH:

AN EXERCISE IN POETIC PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is heuristic, seeking andragogical strategies that may facilitate sexual-spiritual integration in ministerial training. The lived experience of sex and faith of seven Christian ordinands and a newly ordained minister was collected by interview and examined. Sex (sexuality and sexual expression) was revealed to be an arena for the development of identity, moral agency and the capacity for relationship, all of which are components of spirituality. Sex and sense-making about sex is a liminal space in which personal sexual experience, the Christian tradition, and other knowledge are wrestled and a “faithfully realistic” personal sexual ethic is created. This is the creation of practical wisdom, a poetic phronesis. The phenomenology of sexual-spiritual integration through poetic phronesis is theorised to be inherent in the moral creativity of human beings.

Personal sexual knowledge is tacit and subjugated, and there are significant barriers in the Church which disable sexual reflexivity. The argument is made for an intentional andragogy that creates and resources the liminal space in which sexual phronesis takes place. The features of such an andragogy include: the bounding of sacred space, critical engagement with all four sources of theology (scripture, tradition, reason and experience), attending to the ethos of the training institution and the classroom, invitations to engage personal sexual experience through oblique methods, and opportunities for respectful conversation. Ordinands should be encouraged to cultivate a habit of sexual reflexivity and equipped to manage the sexual power and vulnerability inherent in the ministerial role.

It is further theorised that the personal sexual sense-making of poetic phronesis is a micro-example of how lived experience may develop Christian tradition

through poetic practical theology. Experience is reclaimed as a potential source of theology, validated by its fruits. Poetics as an emergent method and model of practical theology is posited as a means by which experience may enter into critical-liminal conversation with other sources of theology, advancing the tradition.

The thesis is written so as to evoke personal sense-making, the medium echoing the message. Metaphor, poetry and story leaven more traditional academic prose to create liminal space in which the reader may be invited into sexual reflexivity.

SUMMARY OF PORTFOLIO

This research concerns sexual formation in ministerial training. The literature review, *Fireside Chats and Formation for Faithfulness* (Grosch-Miller, 2008a), is a critical phenomenological study of a practice: a particular training institution's education for sexual formation. After exploring the discipline of practical theology I present a model to enable theological reflection on the practice, drawing on adult learning theory and the work of Farley (1988; 2001) and Browning (1991). The model enables a description of the faith world of the situation (*mundus/traditio*), reflection on the situation (*mundus*) and on the faith world (*traditio*), discernment of enduring truths about God and the world (*veritas*), and finally discernment and participation in the theonomies in the situation (*vocatio, actio/mundus*). Among the conclusions drawn are that sexual formation is under-theorised and insufficiently attended; traditional Christian ethics are entrenched in precritical ways of understanding knowledge and authority; work needs to be done to discern *veritas*; and a Christian *paideia* for sexual well-being is needed, employing integrative andragogies.

The published article, *Let's Talk about Sex* (Grosch-Miller, 2008b), proposes a curriculum to foster sexual formation in ministerial training with cognitive and reflective components.

The reflective practice piece, *Reflection on Practice: The Importance of the Living Human Document* (Grosch-Miller, 2009), explores the barriers I had to overcome to engage with my personal sexual knowledge. Written in two voices, academic and personal, I discuss the theological and theoretical bases for taking seriously "the living human document" (Graham et al., 2005, 18, 35 quoting Boisen), exploring a theory of experience that is uniquely personal, interactive and formative, and drawing on Farley's (1990) work on the human condition and Timmerman's (1993) work on sexuality and spirituality. Finally I reflect on the evidence of compartmentalization, the splitting off of my sexual experience from this research, and institutional and personal challenges. What opened the door for me was an oblique technique – an exercise in creative

writing led by Heather Walton (2012), whose work on poetics in practical theology will be taken up in the thesis.

The research proposal, *Making Sense of Sex and Faith: Autobiographical Inquiry as a Tool for Theologia* (Grosch-Miller, 2010), proposes to collect data about the human experience of being sexual and Christian, conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry to reveal hidden structures and deep meanings that may assist the development of andragogical strategies to resource sexual formation, using autobiographical inquiry as a primary tool. Personal standpoint is articulated and the importance of researcher reflexivity emphasised.

The thesis became an exercise in poetic practical theology as the title and method emerged poetically and reflexively through the project. Phenomenological exploration unveiled sex (sexuality and sexual expression) as integral to the person and involved in the development of identity, moral agency and the capacity for relationship. The ordinands interviewed made sense of sex and faith by wrestling personal experience, the Christian tradition and other knowledge, cultivating a sexual poetic phronesis. Intentional andragogies for sexual-spiritual integration invite and resource such phronesis by attending to the environment and ethos of classroom and institution, equipping critical reflectivity and encouraging reflexivity. Poetics is a means by which experience may be brought into critical-liminal conversation with other sources of theology to facilitate personal faithfulness and the advancement of the tradition.

INTRODUCTION

INVOCATION: INTO THE BORDERLANDS

Come. I invite you to journey with me into the borderlands. Borderlands entice and repel. Rose light quivers on the edge of horizon: is it the dawn of a new day or dusk signalling nightfall?

Come. Bring yourself...your whole self. The parts you usually leave out of academic or church discourse. The parts left on the shelf when the book opens or the priest inquires or you place your hands on the computer keyboard.

Come. What have you to lose? What if the losing is a saving of your life?

Come. And if you have to stop to breathe, do so. And if you have to read something twice, read it aloud. And if your heart sighs 'Yes' or shouts 'No', listen.

"WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?"¹

The Invocation is an invitation to read this thesis with your whole self, attendant to what is happening in your body and your heart as well as in your mind. The thesis is written so that the medium reflects the message, seeking to create the kind of liminal space (borderland) in which people make meaning from their lived experience in conversation with other sources of knowledge. This is in keeping with the emerging tradition in practical theology that uses creative writing to elicit theological knowledge (Walton, 2011; Slee, 2011). Given the shame and secrecy usually attendant in churches on the subject of sex, I make an explicit invitation in order to create an open space for readers to contemplate their personal sexual experience as they engage the text. Such contemplation is part of the process of sexual-spiritual integration.

¹ The section title alludes to the chorus of the theme song "What's it all about, Alfie?" (Bacharach and David, 1965) from the 1966 film *Alfie* (Gilbert, 1966) in which a man's sexual misadventures lead him to question his life.

This research is a heuristic endeavour seeking to foster sexual-spiritual integration in ministerial training. The research quest began with a problem: the prevalence and impact of ministerial sexual misconduct (Grosch-Miller, 2008a, 2-4). Reflexive inquiry (Grosch-Miller, 2009), however, revealed a deeper motivation – a desire to make sense of sex and faith, both of which are borderland places of encounter that change us.

In the first part of my portfolio I developed a theological reflection model (Grosch-Miller, 2008a, 22-25) that enabled critical engagement with the practice of ministerial training, Christian teaching on sex, the human experience of sexuality and sexual expression, and the theonomy –the God-possibilities– in the situation. The most compelling and incomplete part of the model was *veritas*, the discernment of enduring truth. Edward Farley (2001, 168) writes of this process: “[A]s finally a truth about God and the presence of God, it has to do with what the world is and what the human being is.”

Farley did not specify a method for discerning *veritas* but later used reflective ontology –attempting to “think human reality through its very centre”– to grapple with the human condition in *Good and Evil* (1990, 11, 28-29). This is the means I will use as I think sex² from its centre, seeking to discover possible ontological aspects by examining lived experience.

The search for the *veritas* of sex is at the heart of this research. While Farley sought to discern the enduring truth in theological doctrine by examining human reality, my enquiry seeks to excavate lived experience in order to discover something of the working of God in human life. My search for the *veritas* of sex is akin to the search for the elusive *Veritas*, Roman goddess of truth, who hid in the bottom of a holy well and was the mother of *Virtue* (Books LLC, 2010, 70). In this research, seeking the *veritas* of sex led to the

² I use “sexuality” to refer to the broad concept of sexuality, “sexual expression” to refer to sexual behaviour, “sex” as a short-hand term for both together, and “gender” for gender.

discovery of how the virtue of practical moral wisdom is formed and fostered.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Historically practical theology was conceived of as applied theology: the truth revealed in scripture and tradition applied to practical ends (Farley, 2001, 78). The theological truth of sex was derived from biblical texts and the tradition which, Margaret Farley (2006, 43) observes, posited a “consistently negative and pessimistic view” of it. As a result, the story of sex in the Church has been one of struggle to overcome a principally negative approach (see Chapter 5).

In my search for the truth of sex, I will not begin with scripture and tradition. Rather this thesis is a search and rescue mission, searching for the ways and means by which Word becomes flesh in the integration of sexuality and spirituality, retrieving the wisdom of lived experience, and resurrecting it as a source of theology. The methodology is the patient listening to and writing of human documents, enabling deep exploration of lived experience by means of interviews and shared writings. Such exploration led to the discovery of the phenomenology of sexual formation and poetics as method and model in practical theology that may advance the tradition.

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

Before revealing the treasure unearthed by examining lived experience, I provide a theoretical framework for poetic practical theology in Part One (*Poetic Practical Theology*), positing poetics as a method and model of practical theology. The polysemy of metaphor and the earthbound, sometimes heaven-sent play of poetry contribute to the creation of liminal transformative space – a borderland where human experience may be plumbed and theological interpretation fomented. Theology is argued to be a historically situated reflective and interpretative inquiry, and a theory for how experience may be validated as a source of theology is offered. Poetic practical theology is presented as a model for how validated experience may enter into critical-

liminal conversation with other sources of theology, derived from how the ordinands made sense of sex and faith.

Part Two (*The Poesis of Story, Self and Sex*) sets forth foundational assumptions about human being and the larger story of sex in the Church before introducing the research methodology. It begins with the story of storying: how we make sense of our lives by way of narrative imagination, synthesising heterogeneous events and appropriating the larger stories of our culture(s). The story the Church has told about sex, a story rooted in sin and covered with shame and secrecy, sets the scene for why and how this research was conducted.

In Part Three (*The Phenomenology of Formation*), research findings are presented through stories of sense-making of sex and faith, revealing the exercise of moral creativity and sexual poetic phronesis. My thesis proposes a phenomenology of sexual formation: sexual-spiritual integration occurs as individuals create a personal Christian sexual ethic in the wrestling of experience, scripture, tradition and other sources of knowledge. The poetic phronesis exhibited by the interviewees is an instance of how lived experience in critical-liminal conversation with the other sources of theology may advance tradition.

Part Four (*Resourcing Sexual-Spiritual Integration*) draws upon transformative learning theory to propose andragogical strategies that aim to facilitate sexual-spiritual integration through creating and resourcing the liminal space in which poetic sexual phronesis happens. Such strategies include the creation of sacred and safe enough space; critical engagement with all four sources of theology; the examination of personal sexual history unearthed through oblique methods; the encouragement to a habit of sexual reflexivity; and opportunities for respectful conversation among diverse parties.

The larger conclusion advanced in this thesis is that poetics, with its attendance to creativity and proclivity to plumb lived experience, provides an emergent method and model of practical theology particularly suited to traversing the

borderlands of sex and faith. The medium of the thesis will mirror the message, employing poetry and story to foster personal engagement with the text.

PART ONE: POETIC PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

CHAPTER 1: POETRY AS WAY-MARKER AND WAY-MAKER

And now we speak of deep down things

Of dust and dreams and daring do,

Of fragments lying on the ground,

And weeping wounds and shouts of joy.

The mirror shards reflect the light.

The dancers fly and melt and coo.

Love has her way, she'll always do,

Her tender violence that will woo

One alone

One unknown.

Grosch-Miller, 2010

The poem signals the compelling and disruptive power of love that transforms the person from alone to in relation, and from unknown to knowing and being known, playing with the biblical use of the verb “to know” to denote sexual relations (e.g., Genesis 4:1). The thesis thus begins with a hopeful warning that traversing the borderlands of sex and faith is a transformative endeavour. Desire, vulnerability, longing and wounds, as well as grace, joy and love, play their part in sexual formation. Sex is an arena in which we come to know ourselves as beloved and lover.

The altar in the chapel of St Beunos in north Wales is a slab of stone balanced atop a cairn, that ancient way of marking pathways. This thesis' journey into the borderlands will be littered with poems like cairns, signposting the journey and inviting the reader to linger in the borderlands with her or his embodied knowing – knowing often silenced in academic or religious discourse.

The purpose of this Part is to give a rationale for this method of enquiry and presentation: a conversation between poetry and prose that aims to create and celebrate liminal space – a borderland where new understandings come to light. Rowan Williams (2002b, xiv-xv) conceives of borderlands as transitional, holy places where the foreign and the familiar are brought together. In borderlands incongruity effects possibility and unveils hidden realities. The argument at the centre of this thesis is that sexual-spiritual integration is a poetic liminal activity. Sexual expression takes place in liminal space. The spiritual life is created, affirmed and celebrated in ritual liminal space. As poetry engages the liminal space in which experience, imagination, God and sex cavort, poems will mark and make the Way through the borderlands, each an invitation to pause and reflect.

BORDERLANDS: LIMINALITY AND POETRY

Liminality, from the Latin *līmen* meaning "a threshold" (Turner, 2008, 94), describes the borderland between the known and the unknown, what is and what can be. It is a place of meeting, unpredictability and creative tension. It is a place of risk and vulnerability, a place (potentially) of transformation and of integration. This research concerns liminal borderlands between the person and God in prayer and wrestling, between lovers in sexual expression, and between the conscious and the unconscious, all places of nascent self-understanding and self-creating.

Liminal space is not so much about gathering information as it is about encountering and engaging something or someone, some Other. In my literature review (2008a, 7-9, 15-22), I explore how new experiences open the opportunity for learning. Adult learning theory observes that "disorienting dilemmas" stimulate critical reflection and enable transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2012, 101). As it has evolved, transformative learning theory has expanded to embrace emotional, affective and spiritual aspects of learning, recognising the liminal space that cradles change (see Part Four). A-rational and imaginative (Pattison, 2010, 4), liminal space is the space in which mystery

is the most at home. Paradox and polarity thrive, world and word meet, and the finite and the infinite engage each other in liminal space.

We do not live in liminal space all our days. No one could stand on such uneven and trembling land all of the time; we like *terra firma*. Clear borders, certainty and predictability enable us to live in the world. Yet just as the fires of romantic love may eventually become the warming embers of covenanted relationship, what we experience in liminal space feeds, fuels and frees us for a future we had not imagined. We are changed in border crossings, for good and for ill: changed by revelations of the depths of being human and Divine, of passion and of pain, of possibility and of power; changed by the stories we tell of the great traversing, the meaning we make of our experience.

HOW POETRY CREATES IT

*Perhaps it's the white space,
the blank spots between words and groups of words,
the emptiness of a cup held with both hands,
the silence that invites the wild deer to come and drink
at the break of day.*

*Or maybe it's the choice of words
consonant-vowel configurations that tickle the senses
and set the mind to spelunking.*

*Then again, what about the rhythm –
the hopping, popping, singing sweetness,
motion that sets the heart's toes to tapping.*

*Something – everything – about poetry opens up liminal space,
thresholds to new worlds,
playful invitations to stretch and grow and breathe,*

room for God to do a new thing.

Grosch-Miller, 2011

Liminal space is the space in which we stumble toward words to describe what is beyond us and what is becoming. Here poetry is in her element: poetic language creates liminal space. Ricoeur (1991d, 70) assigns key instrumentality to metaphor. Metaphor is a creative use of polysemy –that a particular word may hold multiple, diverse meanings – and a strategy that enables semantic innovation and expresses emergent meaning. Metaphor “blurs the conceptual boundaries of the terms considered” and discloses aspects of reality that cannot be said in a direct way (*id.*, 81). By holding disparate, even discordant, concepts together, the writer re-interprets an event and invites reader engagement and interpretation. So poetry generates liminal space.

Walton (2007, 56) discusses how Ricoeur’s understanding of metaphor points “towards a liminal space in language...which incorporates differences without domination” and overcomes the divide between subject and object. She draws on the work of Kristeva who focuses on how “poetic language embodies... our ecstatic union with the Other, our bodily desires, our indiscrete sensations, our sense of things beyond language...and carries its destructive and regenerative power into the realm of language and culture” (Walton, 2007, 57). Walton (*id.*) reads Kristeva as expressing the conviction that “what is happening in the processes that constitute poetic language can appropriately be described as the encroachment of sacred into a world which fears its ambivalent power.” Here we sense the possibility in poetry, the diving deep into self towards Source, excavating the personal and ultimately the Divine. Walton (2007, 58) observes that the poet Celan celebrates the same potential in poetry, which sets aside “the subject/object divide that sustains the factuity of everyday life” in order to reveal another type of knowledge “*in the mystery of an encounter*”, “perhaps in the cause of a *wholely Other*” (quoting Celan, 1978, 35-37).

IMAGINATION, PLAY AND POETRY

On the seashore of endless worlds, children play.

Tagore (Winnicott, 2005, 128)

In the land of the liminal, imagination – “the place of nascent meanings and categories” (Ricoeur, 1991d, 82)– and play are poetry’s midwives, enabling the birth of endless worlds.

In May 2011 a posse of poets and practical theologians gathered for a symposium on poetics and practical theology. In the run up, participants shared their ruminations on the power of poetry to apprehend and express the Divine. A number mentioned play and imagination (Pryce, 2010; Draper, 2011; Slee, 2011). Pryce (2010, 1) wrote of how

poetry makes a space in which the imagination may come out to play, taking the different dimensions of human experience and giving them particular meanings in a game of make-believe which may leave the perception of the world very different...

Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (2005, 18) considers art and religion to be intermediate areas of experience – free spaces away from the strain of relating inner and outer reality. These intermediate areas of experience, he theorises, are “in direct continuity with the play area of a small child ‘lost’ in play” (*id.*, 18). His contribution to psychoanalysis is the exposition of play as key in development, enabling the infant to move from having all her needs met *in utero* to being able to accept and manage the otherness of the world.

Play is a slippery concept; it wriggles out of the vice of strict definition (Hamman, 2012, 45-46). These qualities are observable: play is inherently liminal space, bridging subjectivity and objectivity. In play, the self lets go of herself; play “has its own way of being...without effort or applied intention” (Ricoeur, 1991a, 90-91). Play awakens and fosters imagination and creative and adaptive living (Hamman, 2012, 46). Winnicott (2005, 56, 70, 72, 73, 139) notes that play is: universal; a part of life that facilitates growth and health; inherently satisfying and exciting; built on trust; and essential to creativity and

self-discovery. Moreover adult play in religion and art enables the individual to transcend personal existence, engaging the cultural field (Winnicott, 2005, 135).

More than engaging the cultural field is going on in the play of art and religion. Ricoeur (1991a, 90-94), borrowing from Gadamer's exposition on play as the clue to the ontological explanation of art in *Truth and Method*, writes of play as what enables authorship of a text as well as appropriation by the reader.

Gadamer and Ricoeur posit that the metamorphosis fomented by play is a transformation into "true being": "in playful representation, 'what is emerges'" (Ricoeur, 1991a, 91). Ricoeur (*id.*) calls this a "metamorphosis according to the truth." This kind of characterization intimates that the liminal space of play and poetry may engage the creativity of the Divine. Hamman (2007; 2012, 46-49) and Walton (2011, 4) recognise play and imagination as a means of meeting and engaging with God. Liturgical scholar Senn (1997, 11-14) draws on the work of anthropologist Turner to describe religious ritual as a form of play, liminal activity that enables becoming and belonging for individual and community.

Play facilitates engagement with God and engagement with others. Sex can be playful; that is part of its appeal and its power. Children engage in sex play to discover their bodies (Greenberg et al., 2002, 396-397); my interviews revealed that adolescents play at adulthood by exploring their sexuality. More than one interviewee spoke of sex as playful and joyful, creative of relationship and encouraging human flourishing. More than one also spoke of sexual expression as reflective of divine love.

Poetry is a kind of play, an exercise of the imagination and an engagement with real life. As the language for exploring life as lived (Pryce, 2010, 3; Caperon, 2011), it is rooted in the body and the senses, the ordinary and the everyday (Slee, 2011, 3). Imagination and experience hopscotch, hula hoop and horse around in poetic liminal space, unleashing and expressing the irreducible, mysterious forces and deep structures of reality by means of "semantic impertinence" (Valdes, 1991, 25). Engagement with real life and the potential

to engage the Divine link poetry and practical theology, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Silence, too, plays a role in theological poetics.

SILENCE AND POETRY

Silence and clean white paper are alike receptive.

The urgency, the imperative to write are as directive

As feeling called to stand. Do verse and ministry

Well up from deep below or beckon from beyond? A mystery.

Each brings a resolution. Each seeks to resonate

With kindred spirits, to communicate.

Each flows from isolation to communion.

A sacrament of heart and word in union.

Quaker Meeting, Nesbitt (2011)

Here Nesbitt (2011) glimpses the Holy in the genesis of poetic speech emerging from silence. A poem begins in silence. Some elbow themselves into consciousness planting a seed – a phrase here, a notion there. Whipp, examining the poetic pearls in pastoral care, observes that they are “never entirely of our own begetting” (2010, 348). Webster (2011, 4), too, reflecting on the process of creating a poem, shares Hyde’s (2006) conviction that the gift comes to us not from our own efforts but rather is “bestowed”. As Slee (2004, 59) testifies, poems “frequently appear ‘out of the blue’.”³

³ Slee (2004, 59) remarks that what poems “‘know’ is often as much of a surprise to the poet as to anyone else.” She posits that they “come out of a place of imaginative and intuitive knowing – the same place from which the knowing of dreams and art and contemplative prayer come– that is not amenable to more logical articulation or conscious control.” She has come “to respect what [her poems] know and to trust in their veracity.” It is unclear whether Slee would conceive a divine provenance for this knowing, as Hyde and Whipp appear to. There are those, however, who resist the conception of a poem bestowed. Pattison (2010, 2, n.1) avers that

The silence out of which a poem may emerge is not without content: quiet hands hold the human situation and divine possibility. Slee (2011, 2) speaks of poetry (and prayer) as requiring “as profound attentiveness as I can muster” to inner life and outer, to others, things and events, and “through each of these, attentiveness to the source of all life and creativity, the Word uncreated and incarnate.” She (*id.*, 3) observes that “rooted in the ordinary and the everyday as the arena of the holy, [there is a] strong sense of the incarnational and sacramental in poetry”.

A poem may emerge from the divine penumbra; it may also invite us into it. Whipp (2010, 343) observes the “profoundly revelatory potential” of poetic language, noting that “what is discerned in a Ricoeurian vision of linguistic creativity is nothing less than the divine invitation to human beings to take part in the unceasing generation and regeneration of all things.”

There is yet more to say about silence. Some silences are imposed, from within or outwith. Such silences are particularly significant in speaking of sex in the Church (see Chapter 4). Here it is enough to note the power of poetry to shatter silence (Walton, 2007, 57, 71) and that poetry “reaches some way towards saying what cannot be said” (Stanton, 2011, 1). Speaking out of the silenced, poetry may be a prophetic voice, calling to us from the realms of the Divine (Walton, 2012, 181; Chopp, 2001).

Poetry’s capacity to emerge from, address and manifest the silent Divine suggests the possibility of a fruitful relationship between poetics and practical theology. The argument will be made in the next chapter that poetics is an

poetry “is a genre in the known expressive world, not in any simple way a spontaneous in-breaking from beyond, though it may often have the quality of opening doors in this same known world that allow a different kind of engagement.” Hunt and Sampson (2006, 155, 159-160) refute the possibility outright: discussing “genius” as a metaphor for possession by a spirit, they consider the idea that something may come from beyond as “a form of magical thinking which we use to protect our writing process from scrutiny by others or ourselves.”

emergent method and model of practical theology, one particularly suited to an exploration of sexual-spiritual integration.

CHAPTER 2: POETICS AS METHOD AND MODEL IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

There is natural common ground between poetry and theology. Walton (2011, 3) says that ‘What is poetry?’ is a theological question about incarnation. And Slee (2011, 3) reflects that she “has come to use poetry quite deliberately and intentionally as a means of doing theology.” Poetics is conceived by Miller-McLemore (2012b, 11) as a method of research used to study embodied theologies. I argue that poetics is both a method of research and a model for exploring how experience may inform praxis and develop tradition.

Practical theology has to do with belief and action, faith and practice. Models of practical theology posit how theory and practice relate. Ballard and Pritchard (1996, 57-70), mapping the state of practical theology, suggest four models for practical theology: applied theory, critical correlation, praxis and habitus. The models are not mutually exclusive but are “strands...often woven together and affect[ing] each other” (*id.*, 57). They further identify theological reflection as the methodological tool “at the heart of the nature and task of practical theology” (*id.*, 74, 118). Process more than product (Graham et al., 2005, 5), theological reflection brings personal and communal experience into conversation with Christian tradition and practice in order to integrate belief and practice (Thompson et al., 2008, 8).

The literature on theological reflection is strong on working with human experience (Graham et al., 2005; Killen and deBeer, 1994; Thompson et al., 2008; Green, 1990; Ballard and Pritchard, 1996), but weak on how experience may function as a source of theology that remakes tradition. Thompson, et al. (2008, 200) conclude that “the process whereby insights drawn from theological reflection can feed back...into the remaking of the tradition itself” is “largely unexplored territory.” Ballard and Pritchard (1996, 67) also note the possibility of tradition and practice needing to be changed in response to new theological understandings arising from attention to the lived experience of faith, but do not theorise how that may happen.

My contention is that experience is not only the starting point for theological reflection, but also a source for theology and the primary source for a poetic practical theology. In section 2.2 I argue that poetics provides a model for a practical theology that facilitates a process whereby practice (lived experience, poetic phronesis) resources and develops theory (theology) by explicitly enabling validated experience to be in critical-liminal conversation with the tradition, remaking the story of the human being in God.

A poetic practical theology has elements in common with the some of the other models of practical theology Ballard and Pritchard put forth. Like critical correlation methods, poetic practical theology opens the space for theory and practice to be in dialogue. In common with praxis-oriented practical theology, the starting point for analysis is the concrete situation rather than theory and everything is subjected to critical analysis. Finally, habitus models of practical theology are concerned with the “training of mind and heart” (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996, 68) that will enable growth “in grace and Christian wisdom”, providing a “resource that will stand one in good stead in the hurly-burly of life” (*id.*, 70). A poetic practical theology seeks to engage and resource those processes which create such a habitus. As such it is a particularly appropriate model for this research which seeks to facilitate sexual-spiritual integration.

2.1 WRITING THE BODY: EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE FOR THEOLOGY

Write the body:

*Every curve, every nerve, every cell
deserves to be heard,
to be spelled into word, into being....
Let the body speak.*

Right the body:

*untwist, uncurl, unfold
from the tortured conundrums
forced and foisted*

*for years on her frame. ...
Let her breathe....
Let her befriend herself again.
Let her live her own
deep, dark and dangerous truth.
She cannot lie.*

*Rite the body:
sing, dance, fling the body into sacred space....
In this grace she will be born again, over and over.
No stopping her now....
she is coming to herself,
she is coming into herself,
she is coming
over and over again.*

Slee (2004, 97)

Slee catapults us into the argument for experience as a source for theology: writing/righting/riteing the body as a means of discerning the *veritas* of sex. Exuberant exclamation punctuated with a not so sly reference to the uniquely female capacity for multiple orgasm, it is a provocative introduction to the topic. Being is embodied; bodies are sexed and sexual. Slee sings of the female body which Christian tradition has cursed and denigrated, summed up in Tertullian's statement that "women are the devil's gateway" (Brown, 2008, 153). She seeks in writing it to right it – to undo the wrongs of tradition and history, and to rite it – to celebrate and unleash its power and potential.

The crumbling of the house of authority and the rise of experience

Slee writes/rights/rites out of her embodied experience. In recent decades, poststructural philosophy has argued that human experience shapes knowledge (Polanyi, 1962). In the field of theology, Farley (1988, 3) argues that knowledge is inherently fragile, a responsive activity that is part of the flow of history,

nature and the experiencing self. Thus knowledge is hermeneutic in character, an interpretive activity.

Yet theology often labours under the presupposition that knowledge of the truth of all things in God has been revealed once and for all and captured in the stories and symbols that make up the Christian faith. Farley (1988, 125) describes this as the “house of authority” paradigm:

a pre-critical and unhistorical way of understanding the way the Christian community is founded in such things as grace, Scripture, revelation....The essential feature of the house of authority is its presumption that the historical vehicles through which the community of faith preserves its tradition (Scripture, dogmas, magisterium) have as such, *a priori*, the character of truth. Accordingly, other truths can be settled, it is thought, by reference to and exposition of the contents of these vehicles.

Farley notes that the house of authority paradigm has been in decline for some time in light of the growing acknowledgement of the historicity of knowledge, although theological education continues to labour under its shadow. The problem, he avers, is that a clear and cogent post-authority paradigm that equips the Church to work with the contents of the tradition has not coalesced. His contribution to such an emerging paradigm includes understanding theology not as application of *a priori* authority, but as historically situated reflective and interpretative theological inquiry.

While the house of authority crumbles, with fewer people ascribing unquestioning authority to scripture or tradition, what has risen is the authority of personal experience. Schlitt (2001, 3) observes that experience is the *leitmotif* of twentieth century theology. Schnier (2002, 23) notes that appeals to “my experience” have become “theological common sense”. And, to some extent, so should they be. For, as Farley (1990, 117) argues, “if there is no connection between the elements in the Hebraic and Christian

paradigm and the way we experience ourselves and our world, that paradigm is surely cognitively vacuous.”

There are acknowledged to be four sources of theology in Christian tradition: scripture, tradition, reason (source and method), and experience. Of the four, experience is the most controversial (Charry, 2007, 414). Gelpi (1994, 2) calls it a “weasel” concept. Lane (1981, 5) observes that it has various meanings and invokes significant problems and institutional distrust. Yet in these times, when the authority of individual experience may trump the authority of the Church and scripture, experience is epistemologically central to theological inquiry. As Schnier (2002, 124) notes in his analysis and critique of the uses of experience in Christian theology, “the theologian who neglects the appeal to experience does so at great peril.” The task then is to seek to understand how best to apprehend experience as a source for theology.

The history of experience as a source of theology

Scripture has been the primary source of theology historically (Thatcher, 2011, 35, 38-40) and experience seen as problematic. Yet experience has been silent partner to both scripture and tradition. What is codified in scripture and tradition, Ruether reminds us (Graham et al., 2007, 49), is the particular experience of those who have had the power to tell the story: privileged males. In recent decades the turn to experience has been coupled with a turn to narrative in theology in recognition that human beings make sense of their experience through story-telling (Ganzevoort, 2012, 215-216; Walton, 2007, 42-43). The storying of self will be discussed in Chapter 3. What follows is a discussion of the turn towards experience in theology.

The acknowledged turn to experience in academic theology and philosophy began in seventeenth century England with the beginning of modern science and philosophy when it became a formal category for exploration (Charry, 2007, 414). As scientific enquiry became the *modus operandi* in academia, by the mid-eighteenth century the study of theology was conceived primarily as

the study of theoretical disciplines (Bible, church history, dogmatics) and their application (practical theology) (Farley, 2001, 75).

At the end of the eighteenth century, Schleiermacher (1996, 22-38) posited human experience –intuition of the infinite totality of the universe and resulting feeling– as the starting point for theology. A few decades later Feuerbach (2012, 17-18, 144) criticised the elevation of subjectivity over objectivity, noting the self-referential limitations of subjectivity: God-consciousness is self-consciousness. Thus the central problem of the (re-) turn to experience as a source of theology is articulated: the ever present potential of misinterpreting human for divine experience. How does the human, finite and fallible, know if something is of God?

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the emergence of liberation theologies and the revitalisation of practical theology drew on the turn to experience. Reflection on experience is a central concern of these theologies, which seek to heal the theory-practice split (Grosch-Miller, 2008a, 5-15) and focus on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. The priority of experience has been a particular characteristic of “sexual theology” (Thatcher, 1999, 20).⁴ The contemporary rise of the authority and value of experience honours the historically under-acknowledged power of this source while calling for the means to wrestle the problems attendant to using it as a source of theology.

The challenges of experience as a source for theology

Among the challenges presented when seeking to use experience as a source for theology are: the definition problem (what is experience?); the interpretation problem (experience comes into consciousness through interpretation); and the validation problem (how do we know what is of God?).

⁴ Thatcher (1999, 20) uses Nelson’s (1992, 21) distinction between “sexual theology”, which begins with human experience as embodied sexual beings, and a “theology of sexuality”, which concerns how the Bible and tradition deal with sexual questions.

As to the first challenge, in my reflective practice piece (2009, 3-5) I surveyed theories of experience in contemporary theological discourse (e.g., Gelpi, 1994; Lane, 1981; Schlitt, 2001; Schnier, 2002), concluding that

In the simplest of terms, these theories underscore that experience is a dialectical dance that is *personal* (one can't assume to know someone else's experience; it is shaped by personal and communal realities), *relational/interactive* (involving self-generated action, other people, God or things) and *constitutive/formative* (sometimes through critical reflection).

Regarding the interpretation challenge, while all sources of theology require a degree of interpretation, experience is accessible only through interpretation. An individual's interpretation of their experience will be shaped by their prior experience (Dewey, 1938, 35), which includes the framing hand of culture and language on perception and interpretation (Charry, 2007, 420-421). There is dialogic reciprocity in interpretation: prior appropriation of scripture, tradition and other sources of knowledge influence how one interprets one's experience, and the interpretation of experience influences how one apprehends scripture, tradition and other sources of knowledge. The interpretation challenge invokes the importance of critical reflection on experience to examine frames of reference and assumptions that shape interpretation. As explored in transformative learning theory (discussed in Part Four), critical reflection enables the jettisoning of assumptions that do not foster human flourishing. As important is reflexivity, which facilitates self-knowledge (Hunt and Sampson, 2006) and the construction of practical wisdom. Reflectivity and reflexivity will be discussed in Chapter 6; they are central to the phenomenology of formation through poetic phronesis which is proposed in Part Three.

As for the third challenge –how one knows something is of God– I argue that ordinary experience can be a source for theology when it is validated by its fruits. Because experience is formative, one may evaluate the interpretation of an experience by considering the content, impact and outcome of the

experience – holding it up to what is known of God and the *missio Dei*. The gospels testify that this is how people in first century CE Palestine recognised that Jesus was of God. Luke reports that when the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus “Are you the one to come?”, he replied “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (Luke 7:18-22). Likewise the Johannine community criticised people for not recognising Jesus despite seeing the works that he did in God’s name (John 10:22-39). The faithful too are instructed to recognise the works of God by the fruits of the Spirit, attributes that will be manifest in the follower’s life (Galatians 5:16-26).

Evaluating the potential of particular experience as a source for theology focuses on whether the fruits of the experience manifest God. A number of theologians implicitly recognise such an outcomes-based criterion. Graham (2002, 7) understands theology as a performative discipline, the authenticity of which is judged by transformed action. Macquarrie (1980, 37) evaluates experience based on intentionality (stretching the person beyond the self) and ultimacy (transcending experience and culture), qualities that would be observable. Similarly, Schlitt (2001, 7) describes the movement of the Spirit as dynamic and enriching. Finally, Williams (2007, 30) conceives of revelation as the meaning of God establishing “itself among us as the loving and nurturing advent of *newness* in human life – grace, forgiveness, empowerment to be agents of forgiveness and liberation”. I reject as too limited Charry’s (2007, 422) argument that the only experience that may be a source for theology is “Christian Theological Experience”: experience of divine calling known through scripture, tradition and worship. Such a definition does not enable sufficient critical reflection on scripture and tradition and is particularly unhelpful in the exploration of sex given the tradition’s historically negative treatment of sex.

My method of reflective ontology –thinking “human reality through its very centre” (Farley, 1990, 11)– begins with experience. Discussing the sources of theology and their problems in sexual ethics, Thatcher (2011, 40) concludes

that “[e]xperience *is* an important source for theology,” conceiving it as a necessary fourth leg to the stool. While he privileges scripture as “primary Tradition” (*id.*), his approach is dialogical (1993, 2) – holding the sources together to see how they may more faithfully reflect God’s presence in human life. In contrast, the method and model of poetic practical theology I propose begins with and privileges experience, mining it for insight into the human condition and the human-Divine connection. I seek to engage human experience in a fresh way, relatively free (given that the interpretation of experience is shaped by tradition) of the suspicion and negativity with which Christian tradition has approached sexuality. Having engaged, interpreted and sought to validate human experience as a source of theology, that experience is then able to be brought into conversation with the other sources of theology, potentially developing the tradition.

2.2 POETICS AND THE REMAKING OF TRADITION

*Now pray,
as I who came back from the same confusion
learned to pray.*

*I returned to paint upon the altars
those old holy forms,
but they shone differently,
fierce in their beauty.*

So now my prayer is this:

*You, my own deep soul,
trust me. I will not betray you.
My blood is alive with many voices
telling me I am made of longing.*

*What mystery breaks over me now?
In its shadow I come into life.
For the first time I am alone with you –*

you, my power to feel.

Rilke, *The Book of a Monastic Life*, I, 39 (Macy and Barrows, 1996, 77-78)

Human beings create out of the stuff of the world. We work the clay of the stories that have been given to us, rolling it between our palms, shaping and reforming it. We paint “old holy forms” in colours created from the palette of our experience. To remake tradition is to reimagine our future by engaging the past from a different angle, through the lens of a different generation’s understanding of holiness and wholeness. As I argue in this chapter, Rilke’s “longing” and the “power to feel” are important to the poetic creative task.

Poesis derives from the Greek verb for “to make” (Walton, 2012, 178). As Walton (*id.*) and Wall (2003, 317-320; 2005b, 63) discuss, Aristotle distinguished between *phronesis* and *poesis*, the former “a capacity to reflect and act well in accordance with a virtuous apprehension of...the ethical life” and the latter a mimetic activity producing “transient goods”, not apprehending eternal virtues (Walton, 2012, 178). This distinction shaped Western moral thought, and with the Romantic view of creativity as subjective (Wall, 2005b, 106), poetics has been seen as unrelated to the moral life (Walton, 2012, 178). In this century, Wall (2003; 2005b) has re-imagined the relationship between *phronesis* and *poesis*, recognising human moral creativity as a *poetic phronesis*. Relying on his work, in Chapter 7 I will argue for poetic phronesis in the process of sexual-spiritual integration that forms moral agency through narrative imagination in the individual. This phenomenology of formation, which I derive from examining the lived experience of sense-making in sex and faith, exhibits in microcosm the argument I now make for poetics as a creative method and model in practical theology. What individuals do to make personal sense of sex and faith, theologians may do to remake tradition: utilize poetic phronesis to

enable critical and constructive conversation between experience and other sources of theology.

Poetics and Practical Theology

As Walton (2012, 173) observes, “poetics and practical theology do not enjoy an easy relationship.” She (2012, 173-174) attributes the unease in part to differences in “temperament”. Poetry dwells in the inventiveness of the imagination and the Sheol of the senses. Theologians like rationality, order and morality (Walton, 2012, 173), and practical theology in particular is concerned with action and practice (*id.*, 174). Pattison (2010, 2-3) fleshes out the observation, expressing concern about the liberal, rational, social theological project which is linked to the recent resurgence of practical theology.

Yet a poetic practical theology promises much. Pattison (*id.*, 1) argues that poetics in the service of theology can be “revelatory and epiphanic”, with the capacity to help create “fundamental embodied theology”. He (*id.*, 5) describes the attributes of poetic practical theology which allow for this: the plumbing of the depths of human experience; the valuing of the unpredictable, the delightful and the paradoxical; the creation of new “metaphorical attunements” that may be transformational; and the enablement of playful and creative “messaging around” that may yield self-knowledge and new visions of self and world. “Some words”, he writes, “once heard or read, will not allow you ever to see the world the same way ever again” (*id.*). Thus poetry can assist practical theology to transcend its tendency to be an “empirical ratio-instrumental activity”, enabling it to become “a creative, imaginative and generative, open-ended activity that allows people to return to themselves and reality in new ways” (*id.*, 4).

What makes the relationship between poetry and practical theology promising is that both are concerned with life as it is lived (Caperon, 2011, 2), both are inductive interpretive projects, and both are interested in the transformational power of the word. The potential for fruitful relationship between poetry and practical theology is clear. But how exactly may it work?

Pryce (2010, 4) observes that any recognition of the connection between poetry and practical theology is tacit and that the different uses of poetry in practical theology are “largely uncritical and unconsidered”. Walton (2012, 175) too acknowledges that “when practical theologians employ creative resources they do not generally view their use as epistemologically significant or reflect upon them in depth.” She (*id.*, 175-181) then examines three examples of fruitful encounters between practical theology and poetics that open new horizons for the field: Hopewell’s (1988) classic text on congregations, Wall’s (2003; 2005a) work on moral creativity and Chopp’s (2001) explication of the poetics of testimony. Wall’s work on moral creativity is central to my thesis and will be engaged in Chapter 7; Chopp will be referenced in the discussion of silence in Chapter 4 and of educational practice in Chapter 12. Hopewell’s work provides important insights into the potential for poetics in practical theology.

Congregations: Stories and Structures (Hopewell, 1988) was written during Hopewell’s terminal illness and incorporates his personal search for meaning alongside his search for how congregations make meaning in their life together. He came to understand that congregations are “tapestries woven with distinctive values and outlooks and behaviours” (*id.*, 5) that can be understood using Northrop Frye’s categories of narrative forms, the forms presenting “differing ways of reconciling divine power and human circumstances, which range from accepting the will of an implacable deity to discerning cosmic harmony in all things” (Walton, 2012, 176). Walton (*id.*) notes that the greater significance of Hopewell’s work concerns the “poetic processes through which congregational identity is constructed”: poetic arts of corporate character, plot and the use of metaphor which “sustain narratives with mythic depths that bind congregations into communities of faith.” Most promisingly, Hopewell included a chapter entitled “Christ and Eros” (Hopewell, 1988, 164-177), celebrating “the ‘erotic’ capacities of the rich human imagination and the ‘erotically capacious households’ congregations can become when confidently employing their creative resources” (Walton, 2012, 177; Hopewell, 1988, 171).

Christ and Eros

Hopewell recognised that he was treading tremulous territory by describing imaginative capability and human creativity as erotic, as does Walton. She (2012, 177 quoting Hopewell 1988, 170) writes:

The philosophers and theologians recoil from Eros, “the terrible enchanter.” But we should not despise the passion with which human beings desperately plunge into the chaos of life to seize whatever is needed to create meaning. Theology needs to recognize its own dependence upon the “metaphorical labour,” through which “Eros expresses in part the nature and being of God”.

Hopewell’s choice of Eros to describe human creativity is provocative. Common usage of “erotic” is limited to sexual arousal (Chambers, 2003). In the Christian tradition, *eros* has been identified with human desire, particularly sexual desire, and has been unfavourably contrasted with *agape*, Christian love (Burrus, 2006, xiii-xiv). As Cornwall (2013, 29) notes, “suspicion of erotic desire persists” in some recent Christian theology. Yet a broader erotic creativity that is divine as well as human has ancient and contemporary advocates. “God is eros”, Pseudo-Dionysius maintained in the 6th century, *eros* being the divine longing that is creative (Sheldrake, 2001, 44-45). In this century Burrus (2006, xxi) links erotic creativity to liminal space and incarnation, suggesting that

eros is the power or process of divine self-othering through which creation is ever emerging – that which differentiates and joins, orders and disrupts. A God in and of between-spaces, then, and also a God always incarnating, always subjecting itself to becoming-flesh. Thus, a God who is a Christ, ever incarnating...

Brock (1988, 25, 41) similarly describes Eros and Christ as equivalent in liminal space. She writes of Eros as “the fundamental power of life, born into us, [that] heals, makes whole, empowers, and liberates”, “the fundamental power of existence-as-a-relational-process”. For Brock (1988, 46) Eros, “the incarnate,

life-giving power of the universe”, is Christ, accessible to us through imagination, connection to others and bodily/feeling awareness:

...to be open to the creative insights of erotic power, we must be open to connection, to feeling, to sensuality, and to the play spaces of the fullness of experience, to images, dreams, myths and magic.⁵

The “power to feel” in Rilke’s poem at the start of this section is crucial. Brock (1988, 40) draws on poet Lorde’s identification of the erotic with the depth of feeling that is “at the root of our lives’ deepest meanings” (Lorde, 1994, 77). Similarly philosopher Nussbaum (2001, 30-33) conceives of emotions as expressions of value, concerned with the person’s flourishing. These insights are not unrelated to Schleiermacher’s (1996, 29-33) use of the word “feeling”. As will be discussed *infra*, attention to feeling and embodied experience in the creative work engaged in by my interviewees and myself has been important to the work of integration and self-construction. Such attention proves important in the construction of moral agency as an exercise of poetic phronesis: Christ and Eros embrace in liminal space in which the wholeness of human experience (embodied, emotional and rational) wrestles with the sources of theology.

Walton (2012, 177) describes Hopewell’s “Christ and Eros” chapter as opening “enticing new conceptual space” while failing to present a picture of how Christ and Eros will embrace. Yet Hopewell (1988, 167-168) provides a picture of how Christ and Eros embrace in the liminal activity of the eucharist where “humanly formed words, vessels, and gestures” (“the goods of Eros”) are linked to Christ, their significance “unfolded” and their meaning “thickened” in the ritual which transforms bread and wine into “the eternal feast for all peoples”. Liminal space provides the conditions –a place of encounter, openness and creative tension— where world and Word, Eros and Christ, meet.

⁵ See also Heyward’s (1989, 3) exposition on the erotic as God and the embodied “power of right relation”.

Erotic imaginative work that engages real life is “essential to grasping the fullness of Christian practice” (Walton, 2012, 177). And such work is essential to the individual’s ability to grasp the fullness of Christian being as incarnating love for God, others and self, consistent with Ricoeur’s (1991a) theory of appropriation of texts (Part Two *infra*). The poetic has been handmaiden to the Holy throughout this research. Interviewees have employed art, poetry and narrative imagination to wrestle from personal experience a sense of self, agency and responsibility, and to integrate Christian values. Eros has enabled incarnation through poetics, Veritas giving birth to virtue.

Poetry and prophecy

Biblical prophets were messengers of God who called humanity to faithfulness. They arose because of the suffering of people: neglected widows and orphans, exploited workers, the landless poor who starved while the rich dined sumptuously. The prophetic word alerts God’s people to the dissonance between their values and their practices, warns of dire consequences, and calls for transformed hearts and deeds. As poetry has the potential to change perception and action, and to integrate thought, word and deed, poetics may be a powerful prophetic tool.

Poetics can serve the prophetic because poetry can change the way we orient ourselves in the world (Ricoeur, 1991d, 85) and rejuvenate “our potential for authentically human action in the world” (Whipp, 2010, 343). Walton (2007, 73) identifies the power of imagination to transform:

I am inciting people to imagine. I am trusting imagination is transformative and that poetry creates change...what I am reaching for are ways of speaking that provoke an encounter or epiphany. I am also seeking words virulent enough to invade our consciousness as an infection, virus, stain or taint. Words that will mutate our minds.

Not all products of the imagination are revelations of the Divine. And not all transformations are harbingers of hope crafted in the divine heart. One must discern from whence the wind may have come, holding up the contours of

change against what we know of God whose nature is justice, love, mercy and beauty. By its fruits, the work of the Divine is known.

This research is a prophetic endeavour seeking to resource greater faithfulness in theological education. It unveils death-dealing assumptions that create obstacles to, and life-giving possibilities that fulfil, the divine project of human flourishing. The stories, poems and art of women and men as they strove to make sense of sex and faith revealed deep structures of reality, how life is apprehended and where God has preceded limited human understanding. This is “the practice of theology” with which contemporary practical theologians are concerned (Graham, 2011, 334, 336). It is also poetic practical theology, creating new meaning from engagement with living human documents and a dynamic Christian tradition. In this research poetics has served as a fruitful method and a model for a practical theology that may contribute to the development of the tradition.

Poetics as a model in practical theology

A model for the exercise of practical theology reveals a particular understanding of the relationship between practice and theory. Poetic practical theology provides a means by which practice (experience) resources and develops theory (theology) by enabling critical-liminal (erotic, creative) conversation among all the sources of theology. A model of poetic practical theology can be described in this way (see *Figure 1*): It begins with an endeavour to discover ontological truth about human life by exploring the fullness of lived experience, attending to embodiment and emotion and seeking to think human life from its centre. Once uncovered, that truth is evaluated as a potential source for understanding the Divine-human relationship by considering the fruits of the experience in the light of the *missio Dei*. Experience validated as a source of theology is then invited into critical and liminal conversation with scripture, tradition and other sources of knowledge.

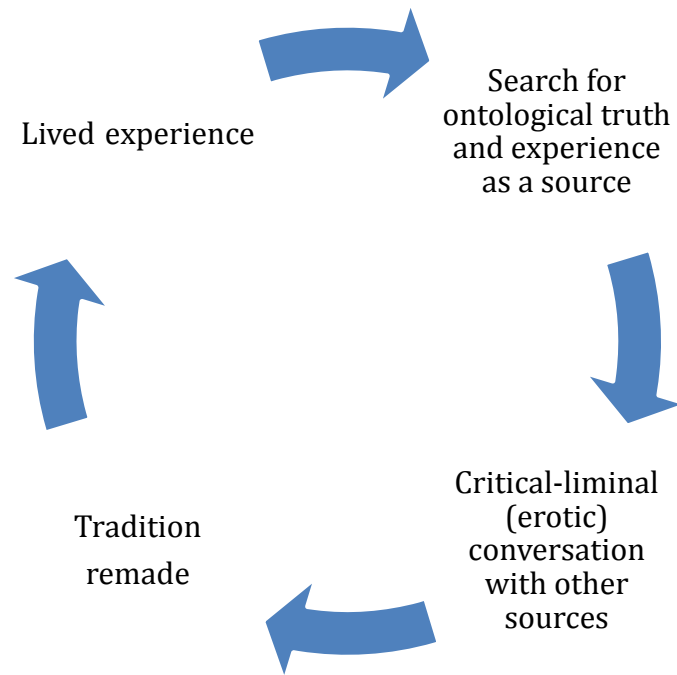


Figure 1: Model of poetic practical theology remaking tradition

The conversation is both critical and creative. All the sources of theology are critically evaluated with sensitivity to the value and challenge of each source, the historicity of knowledge, and the discerning task of theological interpretation. In theological interpretation, Farley (2001, 167-168) advocates evaluating the “normativeness” of the tradition by seeking out the “persisting imagery, symbols and doctrines” that express “enduring truth” about God (see also 1988, 141-142, 150-153). An outcome of the critical-liminal conversation may be the refinement or re-imagination of the tradition so that it more fully reflects the truth of the human being in God. The re-made tradition may then be validity tested as to how it fits lived experience.

While the description of this model is circularly linear and mimics the pastoral cycle (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996, 77-78), the process is anything but linear: understanding is formed and fomented in a more chaotic and creative way in both the individual and the tradition as new insights are tested against understandings and experiences.

This model of poetic practical theology derives from the phenomenology of formation I hypothesise from my examination of the lived experience of sense-making of sex and faith (Part Three). In liminal space, experience converses with scripture, tradition and other knowledge through narrative sense-making to create practical wisdom in the individual. The phenomenon further develops the tradition, affirming sex as an arena of divine activity. This is the work of poetic phronesis, in the individual and in the tradition.

A poetic model of practical theology is most appropriate for this research because, as discussed in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 10.1, sex has been narrowly and negatively framed in Christian tradition. The deep engagement with lived experience enabled by poetics may contribute to the development of the tradition by enabling disciplined discernment of how experience may reveal divine action. Moreover, sexual expression, self-narration and integration occur in poetic liminal space and are best captured by a model of practical theology that engages such space.

Poetics is both method and model in this thesis, as lived experience will be engaged critically and liminally to seek to understand the integration of sexuality and spirituality. Before describing the research methodology (Chapter 6), I consider the poesis of self through story.

PART TWO: THE POESIS OF STORY, SELF AND SEX

*The hour is striking so close above me,
so clear and sharp,
that all my senses ring with it.
I feel it now: there's a power in me
to grasp and give shape to my world.*

Rilke, *The Book of a Monastic Life* I, 1 (Macy and Barrows, 1996, 47)

Human beings are both creatures and creators, made and involved in making themselves and their world. There is indeed a power within us, as Rilke says, to “grasp and give shape to” the world. This Part will explore the poesis of self through story-making and the story of sex within and outwith the Church.

In the Christian tradition the story of the human person is told as created in the image of God, fallen and redeemed (Genesis 1:26; Genesis 3; John 3:16). Early on the *imago Dei* was identified with rationality, the capacity to know and to think (Shults, 2003, 164). Built on a Greek dualism that privileged mind over body, the tradition developed to elevate reason as the controller of nature and of the body (Farley, 1990, 77-78; Shults, 2003, 170-174; Nelson and Longfellow, 1994, 71). Thus the will was seen to be the marshal of desire and a conflict was presumed between mind and body with sex as a major battlefield.

The deficiencies of such a theological anthropology are evidenced in the spawning of shame over sexual matters in the Church and those less than successful educational methods that focus on cognition and self-control alone (Guindon, 1993, 102). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to propose an alternative theological anthropology, I note that current developments show a turn towards Trinitarian understandings of the human person as a being in relation (see, e.g., Kelsey, 2009; Reinders, 2008; Salzman and Lawler, 2008; Shults, 2003). Moreover Farley's (1990) theological interpretation of good and evil is a helpful treatment of human tendency and need. A less shaming, less dualistic theological anthropology that emphasises the human person as a work in progress, born exocentric (Pannenberg, 1985) and self-focused for survival

with the capacity and need to learn to be other-regarding, would be a more effective starting point. The notion that humans are “sinful” by nature, engaged in a great struggle between mind, soul and body, reinforces shaming and negative framing that may impede human development (see the discussions of prohibition as a basis of Christian sexual ethics in Chapter 7 and of shame in Chapter 10.2). A re-imagined theological anthropology could support the inherent moral creativity of the human person made in the *imago Dei*, a creativity called forth by the tensions and tragic nature inherent in human living (Wall, 2005b). This is an example of how a poetic practical theology could develop Christian tradition.

In the next chapter, I present the construction of the self as a poetic activity that happens by way of narrative imagination.

CHAPTER 3: MIND THE GAP

We are mysteries unto ourselves. Nowhere is this mystery more baffling than in the gap between what we believe and what we do. The apostle Paul articulated it succinctly: *I do not understand my own actions.... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do* (Romans 7:15a, 19). The gap between belief and action is one that has exercised philosophers, ethicists and religious for centuries. Socratic tradition trusted reason to bridge the gap; Augustine focused on re-ordered desire to reconcile them (Grosch-Miller, 2008a, 13-15). I propose that integration of belief and action happens through poetic phronesis which wrestles personal experience and the Christian tradition, as well as other sources⁶ of knowledge.

For this thesis I examined the lived experience of sex and faith and uncovered a phenomenology of formation: the means by which sexuality and spirituality are integrated in the encounter with self, others and community through narrative imagination. My findings are consonant with adult learning theories positing that formative (and transformative) learning begins with personal experience (Grosch-Miller, 2008a, 7-9, 15-22; 2009, 3-7). Engaging experience is particularly important in sexual-spiritual integration given the barriers to sexual reflexivity in the Church (Grosch-Miller, 2009, 18-19) and the nature of sexual knowledge as hidden and complex. Adult educator Butler Scally (2000, 273-274) concludes that knowledge about one's personal sexual being is subjugated, tacit knowledge and that personal sexuality is a developmental learning project influenced by several factors. Kinsey Institute researcher Bancroft (2009, 2) describes the complexity of influences on sexuality as a result of "the interaction between the psychobiological mechanisms inherent in the individual and the culture in which he or she lives". Reflection on personal experience that enables sifting through that complexity is central to sexual integration.

⁶ See Farley (2001, 134-135; 1990) for the importance of including human, social and natural sciences in the study of theology and theological interpretation.

Such reflection is also central to thinking theologically about sex. Nearly fifty years ago Maslow (1965, 136) called for phenomenological studies on sexuality which were entirely missing in the whole of sexological literature. He (*id.*, 140) also called for phenomenological study of sexuality as a “trigger to transcendent experiences... of sexuality as a sacred act.” He (*id.*) continued

I can report from my researches (which did not start with sex as such but were concerned simply with collecting peak experiences and transcendent experiences) that sex is, under the right circumstances, one of the paths to the transcendent experiences.

My research constitutes such a phenomenological study, examining “living human documents” (Graham et al., 2005, 18, 35 quoting Boisen) which have the capacity to take us into the depths of the self (*id.*, 44) and into the borderlands where the self is re-made in encounter with another and arguably with God.

STORIED LIVES

*She who reconciles the ill-matched threads
of her life, and weaves them gratefully
into a single cloth –
it's she who drives the loudmouths from the hall
and clears it for a different celebration*

where the one guest is you.

*In the softness of evening
it's you she receives.*

...

*With each disclosure you encompass more
and she stretches beyond what limits her,*

to hold you.

Rilke, *The Book of a Monastic Life* I, 17 (Macy and Barrows, 1996, 64)

One of the ways in which the self is understood to be constituted is through narrative (Maitland, 2008, 239-240; Ricoeur, 1991b): we come to know ourselves by the reconciling of the “ill-matched threads” in the stories we construct about our lives. The story of our self changes over time as we have new experiences and garner new insights. The human being is a poetic self in process, a process into which, as Rilke suggests, God may be welcomed.

Neuroscience research hypothesises the brain functioning that may enable self-construction. Damasio (2000, 189) believes that storytelling is “probably a brain obsession....[that precedes] language, since it is, in fact, a condition for language, and it is based not just in the cerebral cortex but elsewhere in the brain.” He (*id.*, 199, 230) theorises that the self is made up of the nonconscious neural signalling of an individual organism which begets a nonverbal “proto-self”, which permits “core self” (transient, conscious and noninterpretive) and “core consciousness”, enabling an “autobiographical self” derived from the core self and autobiographical memory. He (*id.*, 224-226, 191) concludes:

The idea each of us constructs of ourself, the image we gradually build of who we are physically and mentally, of where we fit socially, is based on autobiographical memory over years of experience and is constantly subject to remodelling.

The core *you* is only born as the story is told, *within the story itself*.

In *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, Ricoeur (1991b, 432, 434) postulates that “a life is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it is not interpreted.....life [is an] incipient story...an activity and a desire in search of a narrative.” It is the story told –the interpretation of events synthesised and emplotted, the poesis of meaning made– that gives us an identity. Ricoeur bases his theory on the narrative intelligibility of experience, a wisdom articulated in the semantics of action and of story, and action articulated in symbolic

conventions which meet the pre-narrative quality of experience and enable expression.

Emplotment gives shape and direction to life stories, an integrative process according to Aristotle whose *Poetics* prefigures Ricoeur's theory of narration (Ricoeur, 1991b, 426). Plot –“the creative well-spring of the story” (*id.*, 429)– and the synthesis of heterogeneous events enable the story of a life to be an intelligible whole (*id.*, 426). This is a poetic act of narrative imagination (Kearney, 2004, 55).

As well as enabling integration, plot gives the story direction; there is an end towards which the story moves (Ricoeur, 1991b, 427). Virtue ethicist MacIntyre (2007, 216), who conceives of the human being as “essentially a story-telling animal”, posits that the end, the *telos*, is what enables moral unity and action (*id.*, 218-219). Ricoeur (1991b, 426) and MacIntyre (2007, 214-215) agree: it is intelligibility (sense-making) that links action and narrative, served by plot and end. Damasio (2000, 224-225) too allows that a sense of anticipated future shapes the autobiographical self.

Ricoeur's and MacIntyre's narrative theories derive from reflective ontological assumptions:⁷ that human beings seek to make meaning from the events in their lives, constructing a personal identity — an ‘I’ who understands her place in the world and who is able to relate to other ‘I’s. As discussed above these assumptions may have a neurological basis (Damasio, 2000, 191-192). They will also reappear as the story of sex is told: human sexual development looks to have a *telos* of identity/agency and relationship.

Both Ricoeur and MacIntyre understand the narrating ‘I’ as formed by the stories of other ‘I’s, including the myths that are the “imaginary nucleus” of the culture (Ricoeur, 1991c, 482-482), “the story of those communities from which

⁷ These assumptions reflect what phenomenologists call “invariant structures” in human consciousness that provide “the foundational bases upon, or set of conditions through which, our unique interpretations of reality are formed” (Spinelli, 2005, 9).

I derive my identity”(MacIntyre, 2007, 221). When it comes time to unpick the influences on personal sexuality, it is a complex tangle of narratives that coalesce and shape the ‘I’ who seeks to know herself and relate well to others. Nor is tradition static: it is living and advanced by innovation and argument (MacIntyre, 2007, 222, 260; Ricoeur, 1991b, 432; 1991c, 485; see also Winnicott, 2005, 134). I proposed in Part One that poetic practical theology may venture to advance tradition.

Some shaping narratives have destructive power in individual lives. This has been seen in the story of sex told by the Church particularly in the lives of women and of lesbian, gay and bisexual people (Bancroft, 2009, 193, 273-274, 332; Mahoney and Espin, 2010). These narratives need to be picked apart (Walton, 2007, 44). This may happen as new experiences are assimilated, frames of reference are critically evaluated, the tangle of narratives reconfigures, and new futures are anticipated. The story of one’s life is continually being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. “A real self is something to be discovered and created, not a given, but a lifelong endeavour” (Lynd, 1958, 203).

SEX, SELF AND STORY

Foucault (1978, 155-156) concluded that sex is key to narrative intelligibility and identity in the contemporary West. Following on from the crumbling of the “house of authority” and the rise of experience as a source for apprehending God, I argue that personal narrative is the poetic activity through which people integrate their sexuality and spirituality. This has been the case for Christians whose sexuality is regarded as deviant from Church teaching. Sociologist Yip studies the spiritual lived experience of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) Christians. Yip (2002; 2003; 2007) consistently has found that these Christians reject the authority of the Church to determine their sexual theology, instead crafting a sexual ethic shaped significantly by their experience. Yip (2007, 84) writes:

In the case of Christianity, the growth of LGB-affirming sexual theology in the past three decades has significantly strengthened the theological capital for LGB Christians. From the much cited and controversial work of Boswell (1980) to more recent work (e.g. Stuart, 2003; Guest, 2005), this corpus of literature significantly challenges the interpretive monopoly of religious authority structures. It provides an alternative interpretation which critiques traditional hermeneutics by highlighting its inaccuracy and socio-cultural specificity. Further, it encourages believers to *relocate interpretive authority from religious authority structures to the self—with personal experience as the basis*—as such structures are considered heterosexist and homophobic. It also seeks to cast new light on these texts in order to generate spiritual and ethical guidance for LGB-affirming religious life (emphasis added).

Yip's findings are reflected in the experience of the bisexual woman I interviewed and also feature in stories told by heterosexual interviewees. That the self has become more self-authorising, Yip (2003, 135-136, 143-144) notes, reflects the construction of personal identities in late modern society for gay and straight people alike.

Sex also has been found to be an important source of the story of self and God for a number of women writers. Walton (2007, 79-108) discusses the writing of Roberts, Smart, Irigaray and Hillesum in this regard. She (2007, 96) describes Irigaray's "audacious strategy" whereby

the female sexed body becomes the most significant trope pointing to the sensible transcendental, an image of the divine which mediates between flesh and spirit. She articulates the potential this offers for revisioning a metaphysical system that has become deathly. Now there exists a remarkable opportunity to engage in the "remaking of immanence and transcendence notably through this *threshold* which has not been examined as such: the female sex".

Walton (2007, 96) observes that Irigaray conceives sexual desire as divine yearning, love as the vehicle which transverses liminal space, and the “memory of flesh” as “ethical fidelity to the incarnation”. Haldeman (2003) and Lawler and Salzman (2011) also write of sex as revelatory of the Divine in human life. The story of sex, self and God as it is written in the life of a person may contribute to the re-imagining of the story that is theology, as well as being important in the construction and integration of the self.

I made the case for exploring the living human document in my reflective practice piece (2009, 7-14). There I discussed sexuality as a personal reflexive project, integral to personhood (identity, development, creativity and relationship) and intimately related to spirituality, our sexuality providing rites of passage that contain spiritual tasks and achievements. Lived experience –the stories we tell of our sex– is an essential resource for plumbing the *veritas* of sex and enabling the creation of sexual practical wisdom.

Yet those stories are not easily or often told in the church. There are silences to be navigated.

CHAPTER 4: SHHH!!

I play a word association game with students at the start of courses on sex and ministry. I have played this game with dozens of small groups; the outcome is almost always the same. When I ask people to freely associate on the word pair “Church - sex”, there is a stone cold silence before halting speech offers up words like: “no!”, “taboo”, “secret”, “don’t go there”. This contrasts starkly with the flood of words evoked by the word pair “society - sex”, and the joyful words offered unstintingly in response to the word pair “God - sex”. It seems we know more than we think we do about what God has to do with sex. But why the silence on “Church- sex”? And why the great gulf between “Church - sex” and “God - sex”?

The first task, then, is to be aware that we rush in where angels fear to tread as we broker the silence that surrounds sex in the Church.

ENGAGING SILENCE

Despite the torrent of language and imagery that bombards Western consciousness about sex, it is the silences surrounding sex that are most intriguing. There is the silence of flush-cheeked embarrassment; the silence of secrecy and the silence of shame; the silence of confusion and of waiting for clarity; the silence of grief and the silence of shocked rage. There is silencing as well – a voice arises and it is ignored, shut up or sent to the naughty step, strangled by its owner, hot and stuck in the oesophagus.

And there is yet another silence. Maitland (2008, 277-279) attempted to put words to this silence and others like it:

...there is a silence around sex, which is quite other than the silence of shame. There is something about sexual passion that language cannot comprehend or represent and at best there is no reason to try.....

All these silences [including the silence of death] have some quite specific things in common: for example, a sense of ‘givenness’ – that this experience comes from ‘outside’ the normal self and cannot be

commanded or controlled, though it can be evaded or avoided. At the same time they are experienced as integrative; the whole self is engaged and *known* to itself, in a new way.....Whether we see silence as the way to access these states –that is, whether we see it as a liminal state or a doorway– or whether we see silence as the autonomous space within which these experiences are happening, we cannot just say this is void or negative; that all silence is waiting –or wanting, needing, yearning– to be broken. Or that it ought to be broken.

Maitland recognises a holy silence around sex (see also Ricoeur, 1994, 83-84). Perhaps it is this glimmer of recognition that protects the power of sex to evoke and express the holy. In his discussion of the ways cultures “produce” the truth of sex, Foucault (1978, 57) writes that in cultures that conceive of sex in terms of an *ars erotica*, sexual knowledge remains secret “because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to the tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged.” Something of sex resides in the Holy of Holies, guarded by silence, held in the secret recesses of heart and mind.

Is this the silence I seek to engage? Or is it another silence?

Here I confess: when I conducted interviews I did not seek physical details of sexual expression. I was unable to cross that boundary. It seemed a transgression of the dignity of the persons involved and of the holiness of relationship. Although conversation skittered around the edges, I sought no “thick” description of sexual acts with others. Was this an intuitive grasping of sexual intimacy as a Holy of Holies, never to be entered except by a fire-proofed high priest? Was I negotiating the intimacy of the interview, not wanting to increase it? Or was this boundary-keeping a failing in me, a product of my culture and generation? (Here I recall the testimony of a young female interviewee that she and her female friends have always talked openly and specifically about sexual acts.) Perhaps it was no one thing, but a

complex interplay of many – as sexuality is itself. I remain respectful of a holy silence around sexual expression.

There are many kinds of silences. Some perhaps are best left unbroken; some cry out for a breaching of stony walls. Slee (2004, 2) articulates it well:

We must keep each other company in silence. We must cherish the good silences of wonder, completion, ecstasy and intimacy. We must wait out the heavy silences of uncertainty, ambiguity and anguish. We must come against the deadly silences of paralysis, passivity, hatred and abuse. We must learn all the many languages of silence, discriminate between them, know when to tarry, terminate or tease our way out of wordlessness.

Linguists and communication theorists tell us that silence is a communication strategy and that it is ambiguous (Zerubavel, 2006, 8; Jaworski, 1993, 24, 47, 68-69). Silence is ambiguous in that it requires interpretation and, like metaphor, is polysemic, capable of holding diverse and even logically opposite meanings (Jaworski, 1993, 68). It is ambiguous in its intention and in its impact (Jaworski, 1993, 67).

The ambiguous nature of silence is what has enabled church authorities to use silence around sex to preserve the status quo while ironically enabling secret growth and resistance. Foucault helps us to understand this in his analysis of power, which is transmitted, produced and destabilised by discourse and by silence. He (1978, 101) writes that “silence and secrecy”, like discourse, “are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.” My research confirmed this as one interviewee reflected: “...belonging to a church where nobody really mentioned anything about [sex],...I assumed that they were all fine with things like [adolescent sexual exploration and ‘losing my virginity’].”

Not everyone, though, finds the silence of the Church benign.

THE BIG SECRET: SEX IN THE CHURCH

silence
hushed, holy
opening, emptying, cleansing
eternal horizon spilling grace
being

silence(d)
strangled, searing
crushing, twisting, killing
unspeakable pain spilling tears
dying

Grosch-Miller, 2012

The cinquains express the power and ambiguity at work in silence.

Foucault (1978, 155, 157) conceives of sexuality as a historical construction produced by power, the operation of which requires secrecy. While I conceive of sexuality as formed in the interplay of psychobiological, interpersonal and cultural factors, I recognise that the conversation and lack thereof about sex in the Church is fundamentally about power.

The Hebrew words for silence and paralysis are derived from the same root (Zerubavel, 2006, x). Zerubavel (2006, 26) argues that taboos that prohibit speech are designed to limit knowledge, noting that the first prohibition in the Bible is against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Genesis 3:3).

Ignorance is meant to paralyse. This intention is operant in what Bancroft (2009, 1) calls “sex negativism”: “the view that it is better to ignore sex than to attempt to understand it, for fear that in the process you somehow encourage it”.

Sex negativity contravenes the maxim that knowledge is power. If one seeks to express one's sexuality wisely, one ought to know it.⁸ In the Church the problem has been in part epistemological – a circumscription of the sources of knowledge and a category error of how sex was defined (see Chapter 5). Once Augustine named sexual power as concupiscence, a desire of the flesh that leads the human away from God (Farley, 1994, 40-41; Salzman and Lawler, 2008, 31), the knowledge sought was how to engage in spiritual warfare. Knowing and controlling sex became the province of penitential practice (Farley, 2006, 41; Foucault, 1978, 18-20, 107-108, 116-117). Shame and secrecy were institutionalised, even in ministerial training (see Zerubavel, 2006, 6-7).

From early on the Church sought to regulate sex, exercising power through public silence and the private confessional. In the process, by design and by default, it marginalised women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people. This is a classic example of the use of silence to control and impose the status quo (Jaworski, 1993, 110); freely circulating information destabilises existing power structures (Zerubavel, 2006, 41). By defining the terms, controlling the forms of conversation, and fostering a culture of shame and secrecy,⁹ the Church limits knowledge and keeps power concentrated in the hands of heterosexual males. It is not by accident that silence around sex is coincident with limitations on the recognised ministries of women and LGBT people, and with the prevalence of male on female ministerial sexual misconduct and the Church's DIM¹⁰ response. Silence is a breeding ground for abuse, empowering repeat offenders and disempowering marginalized peoples (Zerubavel, 2006, 42; Jaworski, 1993, 118ff).

⁸ Good sex education programmes contribute to delaying the age of first intercourse and increase the consistent use of effective methods of birth control (Greenberg et al., 2002, 61-62).

⁹ Sharma (2011, 37, 54, 63, 68) found that silence was a strategy of young Christian women in negotiating their sex and faith. The Church's culture of secrecy and silence as a barrier to reflective/reflexive practice is discussed in my reflective practice piece (2009, 18-19).

¹⁰ DIM – denial, ignorance and minimisation – is how one survivor of ministerial sexual abuse characterises the institutional response (URC, 2006, 13).

My research indicates strongly that “don’t ask, don’t tell” continues to be the *modus operandi* in Church and training institution when it comes to sex.¹¹ One man described his sexual life as “the stuff that you don’t talk about with people.” A woman, speaking of her university experience, said:

In my Christian circles, you know, you didn’t do it ‘til you were married. People were obviously testing that quietly on the side, but you didn’t....if you were doing it...you didn’t tell anyone.

That attitude persists. One man reflected:

I’ve just written down “experience of church” and ...there are difficult places especially around our sexual journeys: “absent or unsure or poor”. Sometimes it’s almost an anything goes and *we don’t want to know*, or it’s a very judgmental black and white....*We put it in a corner that we never talk about* and yet it defines so much about who we are, what we do and it actually directs a lot of our behaviour....it’s so frustrating that in church *we’re not willing to talk, we’re not willing to open up* (emphasis added).

Another who had extramarital affairs spoke of them as the “covert stuff that I wouldn’t like very many people at all knowing about”. This man had been required to participate in a C4 faculty¹² before being approved for training. He did so “in the spirit of penitence but also in the sense of quest for truth and to work out what my role had been” in the breakdown of his first marriage. He provided me with the paperwork. It was vague and made no specific mention of

¹¹ As regards silence about sex in the church, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (2012), Part I “Way of Life: Shaping Faith among Believers in Home and Society” includes chapters on playing, eating and consuming, but not on sex. There is a chapter on loving, unsurprisingly under-fleshed and focusing on marriage.

¹² If a married candidate for priesthood in the Church of England has a previous spouse living or is married to a partner with a previous spouse living, a Faculty under Canon C4.3 is required before that candidate can be sponsored for a Bishops’ Advisory Panel.

www.churchofengland.org/media/1329673/section%202.doc, accessed 3 July 2012.

his sexual infidelities, although he used words polysemic enough to imply such. No one asked him to clarify. He described the process:

...my [current] wife and I went along and saw a kindly retired canon... [who] guided us through the forms and talked to us and so on and after that it was pretty much a matter of filling it in and my wife and I finally going in and *seeing the bishop who'd read everything and was quite happy about it*, so we didn't really talk about it very much, except that I told him I'd gone through this process of reconciliation and he said that was obviously gratifying. That was the whole feedback (emphasis added).

When this man's vicar suggested that he might have a vocation to the priesthood, the man replied that he felt "great unworthiness and 'my sin is ever before me'". The vicar's response: "If you didn't think you were unworthy, there'd be something wrong." Again I confess: I have said the same thing to others, many a time. I too have never queried why a person might feel unworthy, so deeply is "don't ask, don't tell" ingrained in me.

The cost of "don't ask, don't tell" is heavy: the loss of vitality that comes when tradition fails to engage reality, the lost opportunity for enabling sexual-spiritual integration, the loss of adherents who cannot with integrity live in such a closed system (Sharma, 2011, 74-75), and the loss of the wisdom, gifts and leadership of those excluded from the dominant discourse. Even worse, the Church's silencing affirmation of sexual expression only in heterosexual marriage has contributed to suffering and loss of life among LGB people.¹³

This kind of silence is worth disturbing. Embodied knowledge –the experience of loving, longing, suffering women and men– breaks the silence with the poetics of testimony (Chopp, 2001; Gough, 2008).

¹³ Bancroft (2009, 273-274) reports studies indicating higher rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among LGB adults and youth.

CHAPTER 5: THE STORY OF SEX

This Part of Your Body

to Annie at 12, beginning the menses

*you won't touch it or call it by name yet
but this part of your body–
this part of your body
you're going to get to know
better than your elbow
this part of your body
you're going to love
and hate
this part of your body
will swell and drip dew
attracting hunters and slaves
this part of your body
may be your secret joy
but this part of your body
will keep you off the streets after dark
it will be poked and spread by stainless steel
scrutinized by strangers with scalpels
behind white drapes
as if it were not a part of you
this part of your body
will stretch over the heads of human beings
or tighten to a finger in its gentle rhythm
this part of your body
is more expressive
than your mouth
this part of your body
laughs louder*

has its own exhausted grimace
this part of your body moans
its lonely emptiness
you will spend your life trying to fill
this part of your body

Max (Sewell, 1996, 102)

Max captures the compelling complexity of our sexual lives. Seeking to tell the story of sex in order to uncover its deep structures requires such truth-telling. My method is reflective ontology, an attempt to think sex from inside of it (Farley, 1990, 2, n.3) by examining lived experience, informed by the biological and social sciences (Farley, 2001, 134-135; 1990).

Reflective ontology assumes that there is some ontological basis for human behaviour, universal generics which are helpful in understanding human life. It places at the centre the “dense and mysterious requirements” of the human being rather than seeking to make our thinking about the human being fit the requirements of a conceptual understanding chosen in advance (Farley, 1990, 11). “Thinking from the mysterious center of human reality,” Farley (*id.*) writes, “reflective ontology works to uncover what violates and corrupts human reality” in the faith tradition. As such it is a methodology well-suited to seeking out the *veritas* of sex.

STORYING SEX

Early in the Christian tradition “sex” was defined as a particular sexual act – vaginal intercourse– and sexual desire was regarded warily as a tendency toward evil. Clement of Alexandria, Origen,¹⁴ Ambrose and Jerome adopted the Greek Stoic view that sexual desire could be brought under control by giving it a rational purpose: procreation (Farley, 2006, 39-40; Salzman and Lawler, 2008, 10-11). Building on this and strongly influenced by the extreme dualism of Manichaeism (Timmerman, 2005, 576), Augustine formulated a procreative

¹⁴ It is believed the Origen had himself castrated as a young man (Brown, 2008, 168-169).

sexual ethic that set the tone for Christian sexual ethics for centuries, his rationale codified in Penitentials¹⁵ from the 6th to the 12th centuries (Salzman and Lawler, 2008, 32-35; Farley, 2006, 41). Although the Reformation freed the Protestant Church from a procreation ethic (Farley, 2006, 45),¹⁶ this thinking persists in the Roman Catholic Church: Pope Paul VI's *Humanae vitae* (1968) reaffirmed the procreative focus and rationale for sexual expression, teaching that "each and every marriage *act* must remain open to the transmission of life" (Salzman and Lawler, 2008, 45).¹⁷

"Sexuality", as we might understand it today, is a concept that the Fathers and Mothers of the faith would not have recognised. The term first appeared in English dictionaries in the early nineteenth century and its meaning remains difficult to delimit (Farley, 2006, 159). Contemporary definitions of sexuality are holistic, including psychological, biologic, interpersonal and enculturated influences (Farley, 2006, 159; Scally, 2000, 1; Bancroft, 2009, 2).

¹⁵ The Penitentials were manuals for confessors, providing lists of sins and prescribed penances. Margaret Farley (2006, 41) describes the Penitentials as containing "detailed prohibitions against adultery, fornication, oral and anal sex, masturbation, and even certain positions for sexual intercourse if they were thought to be departures from the procreative norm" (see also Foucault (1978, 18-20, 116) and Salzman and Lawler (2008, 33-35)).

¹⁶ Farley (2006, 64) concludes in her study of frameworks for Christian sexual ethics:

The fundamental struggle in [Roman Catholic and Protestant] traditions through the centuries has been to modulate an essentially negative approach to sexuality into a positive one, to move from the need to justify sexual intercourse even in marriage by reason of either procreation or the avoidance of fornication to an affirmation of its potential for expressing and effecting interpersonal love.

¹⁷ Salzman and Lawler (2008, 45) argue that this teaching is not in line with the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et spes*, which recognised the relational purpose of sexual intercourse in marriage as equal to the procreative purpose, and that, as Farley notes (2006, 278), "in much of Catholic theology and ethics, the procreative norm as the sole or primary justification of sexual intercourse is gone."

Secular thinking about sex can be categorised by the degree of emphasis placed on the biological or the cultural. Foucault (1978, 155), for example, emphasises the cultural, arguing that sexuality is socially constructed and sexual expression “the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organised by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures.” Sociologists Gagnon and Simon (1973) also emphasise the cultural construction of sex. They propose Sexual Script Theory which locates the origin of sexual development and meaning in social context. In contrast, evolutionary psychologists like Buss & Schmitt (Bancroft, 2009, 8-10) and Helen Fisher (Fuller, 2008, 100-105) emphasise the biologic foundations of human sexuality, identifying adaptive psychological and neurochemical systems that arguably evolved to promote the species’ survival.

Kinsey researcher Bancroft (2009, 1-2) has come to appreciate the role of models for understanding human sexuality, concluding that in seeking to understand human sexuality:

rather than pursuing the ‘truth’ or the ‘reality’ of brain function, or hormone function, or neurotransmitter function, or by contrast, the impact of culture, we should endeavour to devise simplified models of reality. Their purpose is not only to help us grapple with the seemingly endless increase in complexity, of human sexuality and a lot more beside, but also to have heuristic value.

All models, he (*id.*, 2, 13) asserts, should be judged on their heuristic value – if and how they make sense of sex and impart clinical benefit or effective policy. He (*id.*, 2) continues to regard human sexuality as “an enigma or a riddle”, insoluble by scientific progress which itself multiplies questions. While acknowledging the benefits of research, he is left humbled, his “sense of spirituality” “intensified” (*id.*).

For the purposes of reflective ontology and as a teaching tool, rather than proposing an essentialist definition of sexuality, I devised a heuristic model to enable reflection and conversation on the diverse influences on human

sexuality (see *Figure 2.*) The model accounts for the biologic and the social, categorising the diverse influences as physiological, emotional-psychological, interpersonal, cultural and spiritual, all of which overlap and interact. Such a model captures the dynamic nature of the reality of individual sexuality and aims to aid reflection on personal experience in the process of poetic phronesis.

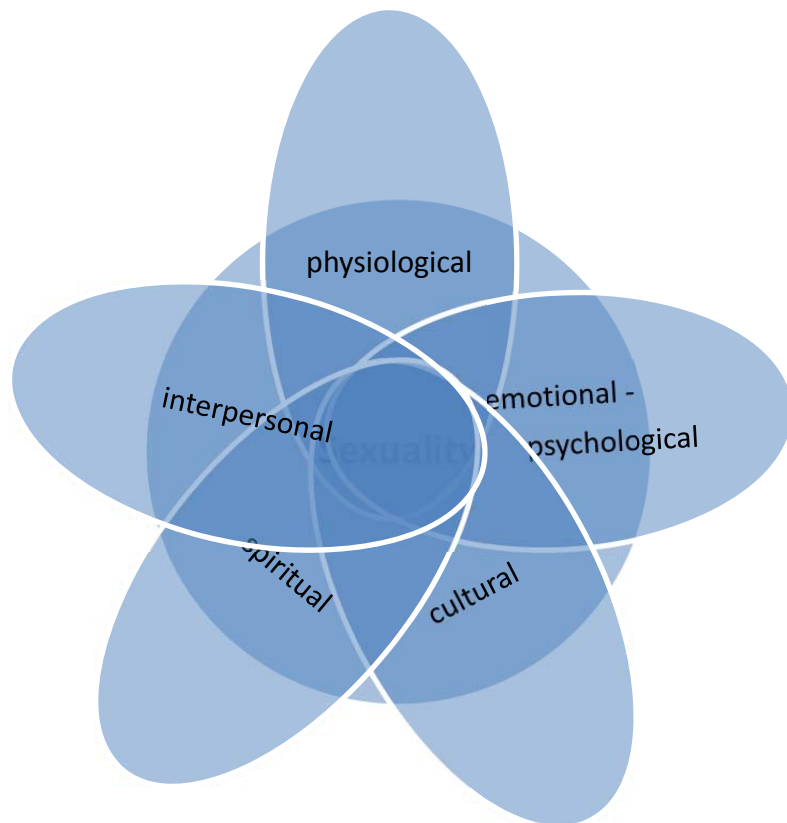


Figure 2: Heuristic model of human sexuality

THE VERITAS OF SEX

Foucault (1978, 57-58) observes that historically there have been two “great procedures for producing the truth of sex”: one (in Rome and numerous societies in the Far and Near East) employing an *ars erotica* by which “truth is drawn from pleasure itself”, the other a *scientia sexualis* “geared to a form of knowledge-power”, specifically Confession as practiced in the Church. Foucault (1978, 56-57) argues that in the West by the nineteenth century “the truth of

sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, ...sex was constituted as a problem of truth.”

Perhaps my inquiry into the *veritas* of sex is a continuation of what Foucault describes as the conception of sex as a problem of truth and “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (1978, 103). Surely it seeks to wrestle the power that has defined sex as a problem to be controlled and regulated and to recognise and resource personal power in the poesis of sexual phronesis.

The means by which I propose to discover the *veritas* of sex is the exploration of the lived experience through the stories we tell about it, unleashing the power of personal experience to illumine the truth of sex and sense-making.

CHAPTER 6: STORYTELLING, A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research began as a theological reflection on the practice of theological education as it relates to sexual formation. The scant literature on the topic, while observing the importance of sexual-spiritual integration (Guindon, 1993, 85; Conklin, 1997, 150; Friberg and Laaser, 1998, 89-92; Ott, 2009, 42), does not theorise how it happens. Areas of study are recommended and desirable outcomes identified (Ott, 2009, 12, 40-44; Friberg and Laaser, 1998, 125-128; Conklin, 1997, 166-167), with the recognition that cognitive education on its own is not enough (Friberg and Laaser, 1998, 90). Implicitly, or more rarely explicitly, the literature recognises that sexual reflexivity would assist the process. Attention to sexual history is advocated in the assessment, selection and training of Canadian Roman Catholic candidates (Guindon, 1993, 58-74, 100-110). Friberg and Laaser (1998, 69-82) provide a healthy sexuality model and recommend ordinands be working towards it, a process that would require sexual reflexivity. Conklin (1997, 156, 167), reporting observations that sexuality education evokes significant emotional “stuff” in students, recommends that there be sufficient time for reflection. Only Ott (2009, 42) specifically recommends that ordinands reflect on their own sexual biographies as part of required sexuality education. Her survey of American seminaries (no such survey has been done of British training institutions) showed that fewer than six per cent of sexuality courses provided opportunities for personal reflection on sexual history and attitudes (Ott, 2009, 34). Friberg and Laaser (1998, 93) note the “paucity of written materials to aid the integration of spirituality and sexuality”.

My interest in the importance of sexual reflexivity grew as my research progressed and I became aware that my own sexual knowing was split off from, though unconsciously shaping, the project. It was a free writing exercise led by Heather Walton that provided the key to engaging personal sexual knowledge. In my reflective practice piece (Grosch-Miller, 2009) I began to give voice to that knowing, exploring experience as a source for theology while reflecting on the significant institutional and personal barriers that occluded sexual

knowledge. From that time I intuited that engaging personal sexual experience reflexively would be central to my inquiry and that oblique methods were a helpful means. I also began to increase the amount of private time I provided students to reflect on their sexual experience. I determined to enquire into the lived experience of sex and faith in order to explore sexual reflexivity in ordinands.

Reflexivity is conceived in two ways. The first, derived from the literature of reflexive writing, is the examination of the self's "mental, emotional and value structures", an internally focussed exercise distinguished from reflectivity, which is "in-depth consideration of events or situations outside of oneself" (Bolton, 2005, 9). (As will be discussed in Part Four, both reflexivity and reflectivity are important in sexual-spiritual integration.) In research literature, "reflexivity" refers to attention to the researcher's position (Creswell, 2013, 47) or standpoint (Harding, 1993), i.e., how the researcher's background, culture and commitments impact the research. Beneath this conception is an epistemology that asserts that all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 2007): where we stand shapes what we can see; and the subject and the object of knowledge cannot be separated (Creswell, 2013, 77). Objectivity is maximized when reflexivity is strong and the subject of knowledge –the researcher and "the historically located social community whose unexamined beliefs its members are likely to hold 'unknowingly'" - is considered as part of the object of knowledge (Harding, 1993, 69-71). This second way of conceiving reflexivity requires both internal and external awareness, assisting the researcher to consider how her experience and position shape the research (Creswell, 2013, 216; Cohen et al., 2007, 171-172; Robson, 2002, 172). Evidence of self-awareness and self-exposure through reflexivity is an element in evaluating creative analytic practices such as those employed in this thesis (Richardson and Pierre, 2005, 964).

As will be discussed further below, my research design (Grosch-Miller, 2010) featured ordinand interviews and autoethnographic writing to surface stories of sexual sense-making. My personal autoethnographic writing was intended to

enhance my reflexivity (Etherington, 2004, 137-149), enabling me to consider how my sexual experience reflects and is shaped by my position as a late middle-aged American-born female who is middle-class, highly educated, feminist and an ordained progressive Christian with an affirming ministry to LGBT people. The writing would also equip me to elicit tacit, sensitive material by experiencing what I was asking of my interviewees. To further aid personal and researcher reflexivity, I engaged an experienced counsellor to accompany me to review the autoethnography and reflect on the research process. Throughout I aimed to practice reflexivity in order to navigate the sensitivity of the enquiry, watch for researcher bias (Robson, 2002, 172), and attend to the impact of context and interviewee-interviewer relationship on the quality of the interview data (Ganzevoort, 2012, 220; Fox et al., 2007, 15-16).

Reflexive qualitative research has been recognised as a means to gain practical theological knowledge (Swinton and Mowat, 2006). Swinton and Mowat (2006, 7, 88-91) privilege theology in critical conversation with other forms of knowledge and are ambivalent as to whether human experience can be a locus for fresh revelation that may contradict scripture, doctrine or tradition (Grosch-Miller, 2010, 11-12). But they recognise that theology itself can and “should be the subject of critical reflection and challenge”, which reflection may be aided by reflexive research (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, 89-90). The intent of my research was to examine the lived experience of sex and faith, discerning what I might learn that could suggest andragogical strategies for facilitating sexual-spiritual integration in theological education. I imagined that what I learned might challenge the sex-negative bias of traditional theology as well as purely cognitive educational methods, but I had no theory about how that might happen until late in the research. The research was concerned to generate, not verify, theory (Robson, 2002, 62).

FRAMING STORY: METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The word “method” has been used in diverse ways in this thesis. Miller-McLemore (2012b, 11, 12) describes poetics as a “method of research”, using “method” as a “way of doing theology”. I have used “method” to describe my

use of reflective ontology –thinking the human being from its centre– as key to the research. In this chapter, I will use the word “method” more narrowly to describe the particular means of data collection and analysis, and the word “methodology” to encompass the rationale, assumptions and methods that structure the research (Cohen et al., 2007, 47).

My methodology is phenomenological and hermeneutic drawing on the work of education researcher van Manen (1990), to enable examination and interpretation of lived experience in an effort to understand how human beings make sense of sex and faith. Human beings make meaning of their experience (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, 5-8), creating and re-creating the story of the self. The specific assumption that structures this research is that personal sexuality is a complex phenomenon that has ontological and socially constructed aspects that are difficult to delimit (*Figure 2*, p. 60). Digging deeply into the structure and meaning of sex requires a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990, 10) and permits the identification of the “universal essence” of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, 76). Such an approach has been widely used to study sex as it enables exploration of “the inter-psychic aspects of the social nature of sex” and the “intra-psychic processes of internal conflict and identity” (Smith et al., 2009, 143).

Given the complex interaction of multiple variables in personal sexuality, it was important to seek to capture this complexity by obtaining multiple perspectives (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, 8). I determined to use a flexible, multi-method approach to yield more trustworthy results (Alexander et al., 2008, 126-129; Robson, 2002, 370-373).

STORY-SEEKING: RESEARCH METHODS

The type of knowledge sought determines the means by which it is sought (Robson, 2002, 80). As the storying of the self is a narrative activity, seeking knowledge about lived experience and meaning-making requires narrative methods: the patient listening to and writing of human living documents. Qualitative narrative methods enable the examination of the inner experience of

participants, to consider how meaning is formed (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, 12). I collected qualitative data by multiple means: ordinand interviews, autoethnographic and reflexive writing, reflection on teaching events and a focus group (Grosch-Miller, 2010). Interviews are most appropriate when the information sought is the meaning of particular phenomenon (Robson, 2002, 271) and they play a central role in phenomenological research that generates theory (Creswell, 2013, 81, 162). Autoethnographic and reflexive writing enabled the management of researcher bias and fostered creative analytic practices (Richardson and Pierre, 2005). Reflection on teaching events provided additional data about the process of meaning-making and assisted me to generate theories about how to facilitate integration. Finally focus groups enable the observation of how interaction with others shapes the articulation and development of personal knowledge (Cronin, 2008, 228).

The key data source consisted of interviews with seven ordinands and a newly ordained minister about their sexual and faith histories. The interviewees were self-selected in response to invitations delivered at training institutions and teaching events. I did not reject anyone who responded. All were Caucasian. Four were female and four male, ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties. They came from diverse Protestant training institutions (Anglican, Methodist and nonconformist) in the UK; their church backgrounds varied in terms of theology and practice. Two did not grow up in a church but found their way there in late adolescence or early adulthood. Four were married: two for many years, one newly wed and one in a second marriage. Four were single, of whom two were divorced. Seven identified as heterosexual; one was in a covenanted relationship with a same-gender partner. Four were parents, with children ranging in age from primary school to adulthood. Despite the size of the pool, the interviewees exhibited a breadth of location and experience.

What distinguished the interviewees is that they were willing to speak about a sensitive and controversial topic. Each was seeking to make sense of sex and faith because of their personal experience. These characteristics were both a strength and a limitation. The strength is that fruitful theological reflection

occurs at the site of a wound; the sense that something must be put right may be a Divine nudge (Miller-McLemore, 2012a, 7; Fulkerson, 2007, 13-14). The best knowledge may be developed from those who feel most sharply where the shoe pinches (Walton, 2007, 70). The limitation is that most of my interviewees entertained questions about some aspects of traditional church teaching on sex, as do I. I endeavoured to listen carefully to all of the interviewees, but especially attentively to the few who appeared fully to accept church teaching.

Interviews were conducted in a private place away from a church or training institution in accordance with my research proposal, providing ethical safeguards due to the sensitive nature of the enquiry including fully informed consent, the right to withdraw at any time, strong confidentiality, the availability of support, and reflexivity in role-management (Grosch-Miller, 2010, 24-30; Liamputtong, 2007). The interviews lasted between one and two hours. Interviewees were asked to draw chronological, spiritual and sexual lifelines that captured significant events in their lives. These served as the basis for an in-depth, semi-structured interview that sought to elicit experience, attitudes and meaning made. Five of the interviewees had been students in different courses I taught and shared reflexive writings made during the courses. It transpired that their writings provided rich primary data as well as deepening my reflection on teaching experiences.

AUTO-CONTRIBUTIONS

While interviewing ordinands, I undertook to write a sexual-spiritual autoethnography with the support of a spiritual counsellor with experience in ordination training and sexuality. My intent was to be accompanied by a skilled expert and to have a space in which to reflect on what I was hearing from others and observing in myself through the interviews. I met with the counsellor monthly, sharing all that I wrote and bringing situations from the interviews. From the outset I did not anticipate the autoethnography to be a significant data source and I did not treat it as such. I wanted the freedom of complete

confidentiality to foster full disclosure while protecting myself and others.¹⁸ This freedom, ironically, validates the process and product as potential data in that the surprises it brought (discussed below) were wrought in exploration unencumbered by expectation.

Autoethnography is one of many types of writing that can be classed as self-narrative, writing which brings the author's "self to the surface as an object of description, analysis, and/or interpretation" (Chang, 2008, 35). The "ethnography" in autoethnography relates to the author's intent to include cultural analysis and interpretation (*id.*, 43), displaying "multiple layers of consciousness" (Ellis, 2008). Given that personal sexuality is impacted by social and cultural factors, and personal sexual knowledge is tacit and subjugated, autoethnography is an appropriate tool for this research. As I listened to the interviewees and surfaced my sexual experience, I became aware of the strength of cultural factors, especially gender and church subculture, on the meaning made of sexual expression (discussed Chapters 8-10).

Autoethnographic texts are written in a variety of forms, including poetry (Ellis, 2004, 38; Etherington, 2004, 151), and for research in diverse disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (Chang, 2008, 32-33; Ellis, 2008). Ellis (2008) notes the burgeoning of autoethnographic projects and the influence autoethnography has had on qualitative research over the last twenty-five years. She posits the turn to autoethnography as in part inspired by concerns about "power, praxis and the writing process", observing that previously marginalised voices have found this method to be particularly powerful. Chang (2008, 32) sees the interest in self-narrative as part of a broader trend of narrative inquiry.

¹⁸ Etherington (2004, 141-142) discusses the complex ethical struggles in publishing autoethnography, which include the difficulty of anonymity for others, the question of consent by others, the challenge of anticipating the consequences, and how to meet academic standards.

Self-narratives have been a meaningful source of theological reflection for centuries. Graham, Walton and Ward (2005, 18-46) in their chapter titled “‘Theology by Heart’: The Living Human Document” discuss the use of spiritual autobiography (Augustine’s *Confessions*), journal writing, personal letters and other forms of creative writing which have provided authentic accounts of lived experience that equip faithful living. They note that creative writing can enable reflexivity and reflectivity (*id.*, 40). Echoing Ellis, they observe that letters, journals and diaries have given marginalised groups a voice in theology, e.g., when male theologians have been blind to gendered assumptions (*id.*, 41). They conclude that “writing as a creative and reflexive activity can be a highly significant means to generate theological insight” (*id.*, 44).

When I began to write my autoethnography, it came in the form of poetry. This was the first surprise and the second time that poetry emerged in the research. The first time was when I was travelling home from my first interview (see Chapter 10.1); it would not be the last time that poetry came forth from an interview (see Chapters 8.1 and 9.2). As I unearthed my personal experience through poetry, I entered a creative process that enabled me to recollect aspects of my experience that were, in Etherington’s words (2004, 146), known “tacitly or intuitively without knowing how”. Some of the poetry I wrote knew things before I knew them, such as the opening poem (*supra*, p. 13) and the last research poem I wrote (*infra*, pp. 76-77). Poetry’s capacity for this kind of recollection is not surprising given its access to lived experience and potentially to the Holy, discussed in Part One. The experience of writing verse and my observation of how some of my interviewees used oblique methods alerted me to the potential inherent in poetics for theology as I reflected on the data. Richardson (2005, 962-963) names the writing process and product in autoethnography and poetry as “creative analytical practices” which enable writers to “learn about topics and about themselves that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytical procedures, metaphors, and writing formats”.

The second surprise that came from writing autoethnography was its impact on me. While I expected and enjoyed certain outcomes (increased researcher reflexivity; deepened personal understanding), I did not expect that at the conclusion of the writing I would feel a new level of sexual-spiritual integration, an ease in body and spirit. That feeling was very strong. Moreover I was surprised that I did not seek, or feel the need to seek, absolution or prayer from my spiritual counsellor when I disclosed transgressive or painful parts of my sexual history. Her patient and thoughtful listening was enough to mediate that grace. I experienced storytelling and story-hearing to be integrative practices.

A number of writers testify that autoethnographic writing can be therapeutic or transformative (Bolton, 1999; Chang, 2008, 53-54; Ellis, 2004, 136; Hunt and Sampson, 1998). Etherington (2004, 145-146) avers that autoethnographic writing can strengthen our connections with our body, mind and spirit, working healing, and Pelias (2011, 663) notes that through reflexive, embodied writing (e.g. regarding sex), “the vulnerable body gains agency.” Agency is a theme that emerged in my analysis of the interviews and features in sexual-spiritual integration (see Chapter 8.)

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: DATA ANALYSIS

My autoethnographic writings are analytic (Ellis, 2004, 196) narrative-knowledge that supported and contributed to the research. They alerted me to personal experience that shaped my interviewing and analysis. I noted my discomfort with asking about bodily acts, my ear for gender difference, and the need to listen particularly carefully to people with whom I had theological disagreement. The writings also surfaced my tacit bodily knowledge and enabled poems to emerge that synthesised what I was learning through the interviews. As such, they functioned as writing which is a creative analytic practice (Richardson and Pierre, 2005). This led me to research poetics as a method in practical theology. I did not systematically analyse these writings further.

I systematically analysed the interviews in a heuristic and hermeneutical phenomenological process (Etherington, 2004, 111; van Manen, 1990). After personally transcribing each interview, I immersed myself in them over a four month period, listening to and reading them several times. In this immersion period, I used common qualitative data analysis moves: coding the data using categories that appeared frequently (parents; peers; exploration; decisions; relationships; marriage; embodiment; divorce; secrecy; trauma; church; spirituality; shame), noting relationships and patterns, and making observations (Creswell, 2013, 184-187; Robson, 2002, 459). Occasionally I wrote poetry in response. Gradually I identified themes, which in phenomenological research are elements that appear to be “structures of experience” (van Manen, 1990, 78-79, 87-88).

The themes I induced from the data suggested general, possibly ontological aspects of sex: that it is developmental; expressive; communicative; purposive; and engendering of self- and God-knowledge and moral agency. As I continued to reflect on these themes and further researched narrative, poetics and moral agency, I came to interpret the stories the interviewees told about their sexual lives as illustrating that:

- Sex is developmental and impacted by the factors described in *Figure 2*;
- Sex is expressive of identity and communicative in relationship;
- Sex is employed for many purposes, but appears ultimately to have a *telos* of identity and relationship, spurring encounters with others which form self and moral agency;
- Sex is linked to spirituality, engendering the capacity for self-knowledge and fruitful relationship with others as well as (for some) apprehension of the Divine; and
- Sex is a reflexive project, formative of moral agency, that occurs in the liminal activity of wrestling self, others and Christian tradition.

As will be discussed in Part Three, together the themes suggest a phenomenology of formation through the poesis (creation) of the story of one's self and one's sex and the development of sexual phronesis (practical wisdom).

The themes resonated with my autoethnographic writing, the pilot focus group I conducted early in the research (Grosch-Miller, 2010, 17-18), and reflection on teaching experiences, all of which testified to the power of engaging personal experience and critical-liminal wrestling with all four sources of theology.

(Reflections on teaching experiences inform Part Four.)

I had intended to further triangulate the data (Cohen et al., 2007, 151-152) by conducting a post-interview focus group. However after conducting the interviews I decided not to because of the need that the interviewees remain confidential. Instead I circulated emergent themes, reflections and the end of the final research poem and invited comment. One interviewee responded (included in the data); the others did not. Nor did they withdraw from the research. The responding interviewee was in a less vulnerable position than the other interviewees for reasons of experience and context.

Why only one response? While conducting this research, I was interviewed for a research project on a similarly sensitive topic. When the researcher sent me the transcript, I found that I could not read it – it was too personal and I did not want to be reminded that I had disclosed the information. From this experience and from interviewee expressions of vulnerability, I hypothesize that some of the other interviewees may not have replied from a similar sense of discomfort.

THESIS POESIS

Van Manen (1990, 124-133), Pelias (2011, 660) and Richardson (Richardson and Pierre, 2005) assert that writing is research in and of itself. I experienced this as I wrote my autoethnography and research poems and brought them into conversation with other research data. When it came time to write this thesis, the research process continued. Aware of the barriers to sexual reflection and having stumbled onto the power of poetics, I sought to engage readers in a way that would be personally meaningful (Etherington, 2004, 151), inviting them –

mind, soul and body– into liminal space to engage the subject matter and their own tacit knowing. I wanted the thesis to honour embodied existence (Pelias, 2011, 663); as one of my interviewees said “...trying to kind of work out what you think about sexuality in the abstract is really difficult; it’s such an embodied thing.” I wanted the medium to mirror the message, encouraging and resourcing the poesis of sexual phronesis. I decided to use poetry as a Way-marker and to tell snippets of story to evoke attention to lived experience as I made my argument. The decision to use poetry led me to positing poetics as method and model in practical theology (Part One).

Before sharing the stories that would illustrate my conclusions, I needed to tell the larger stories of the poesis of self and the story of sex in the Church (Part Two). Parts One and Two provided a foundation upon which I could posit a phenomenology of formation in Part Three and offer andragogical resources in Part Four.

I also needed carefully to craft the final product to protect the confidentiality of research participants. I determined to use one interview as a focus under each topic in Part Three, supplementing with data from other interviews. The focus interviewee was given a fictional name; she or he would not be identified by that name in other places unless directly related to the focus interview topic. Minimal biographical detail would be supplied and, by not using the fictional names consistently throughout, the full story of any particular person would not be revealed.

MEASURING SUCCESS

The question of how to evaluate the trustworthiness of qualitative and phenomenological research is a matter of ongoing debate (Robson, 2002, 170; Creswell, 2013, 244-250). It is widely argued that the meaning of quantitative standards of validity and reliability is different for qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2007, 134-135, 148-149). Contemporary qualitative research frequently draws on Lincoln and Guba’s (1985, 301-331) articulation that trustworthiness be assessed on the basis of *credibility, transferability, dependability* and

confirmability (Creswell, 2013, 246). *Credibility* concerns accuracy and authenticity: does the research data resonate with the readers, presenting a true description of human experience (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, 122)? Of the five strategies Lincoln and Guba (1985, 301- 315) suggest to enhance credibility,¹⁹ I employed three: triangulation through multiple methods and sources; peer debriefing with a counsellor experienced in the field of sexuality and ministerial training; and member checks through sharing observations, themes and findings. *Transferability* is achieved by providing a thick description so that anyone interested in making a transfer may reach a conclusion about whether it is possible (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, 316). In the instant research, thick descriptions of the data on which I base my findings are provided in Part Three and teaching strategies are described in sufficient detail in Part Four to allow such contemplation. *Dependability* and *confirmability* concern whether research decisions and processes are set forth transparently, leaving an audit trail (Creswell, 2013, 246; Robson, 2002, 175-176; Lincoln and Guba, 1985, 317-319). A fifth criterion discussed in the literature, *authenticity*, concerns the diversity of voices heard (Creswell, 2013, 248) and the exercise of reflexivity which seeks to address researcher bias (Cohen et al., 2007, 150).

The unusual format of the thesis, employing creative analytic practices, complicates evaluation of this research. Richardson (Richardson and Pierre, 2005, 964) offers these standards: *substantive contribution* - does the research make a substantive contribution to understanding life?; *aesthetic merit* - does the use of creative practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses?; *reflexivity* - is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view?; and *impact* - does the piece affect me emotionally or intellectually? This thesis contributes substantively to

¹⁹ Lincoln and Guba (1985, 301-315) suggest five strategies for enhancing credibility: (1) activities that increase the likelihood of credible findings through prolonged engagement, persistent observation and/or triangulation; (2) peer debriefing; (3) negative case analysis; (4) referential adequacy; and (5) member checks.

understanding life by providing an affirming view of the place of sex in human life and resourcing sexual-spiritual integration. The invocation and benediction and the use of poetry and story invite reader engagement and interpretive response. The reader is made aware of my standpoint and reflexive strategies in the thesis, and his or her intellectual and emotional enlistment are encouraged by style and content.

Part Two has explored the larger storying of self and sex and set forth the methodology of this research. It is time now to discover what may be learned from examining the stories told of making sense of sex and faith.

PART THREE: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF FORMATION

At long last love

.....

And what do I make of God?

Animator,

Lover,

Subverter,

Irrepressible

God?

We speak of our sex, fearfully, gratefully.

God as Eros has infiltrated,

exploded and invigorated our lives.

We ache for touch and acceptance and love;

desire drives us towards each other

and towards our own wholeness.

We learn of the depth and power of love

in sexual congress,

blessed and not blessed by Church.

Our sexual lives reveal our having been made

in the image of the Great Lover,

expressing our uniqueness

and cementing our belonging.

Our moral agency is fomented and formed

as we live with the consequences

of lovers chosen and sex expressed.

God is all over this project,

in ways expected and unexpected.

The divine fingerprint is never far

*from the human heart
or the human body.*

*Made as learners,
we grow into our capacity to love,
to make choices that
serve the well-being
of self and other.*

*Made as lovers,
our story is never our own;
we are made in relationship,
made for relationship.*

*Made as glimmer in our Parent's eye,
our sex is method, means and manner
of becoming Person-Gift,
telos and tikkum olam.²⁰*

*The kiss of life,
the divine bending tenderly
over dust and clay,
goes on....*

Grosch-Miller, 2011

This is the end of the final research poem I wrote. It presaged conclusions I came to as I wrestled the data and posited the *telos* of sex ("desire drives us

²⁰ *Tikkum olam* is Hebrew for "repair of the world", used by 16th century Kabbalist Luria to describe humanity's great task. <http://www.innerfrontier.org/Practices/TikkunOlam.htm>, accessed 7 April 2012.

towards each other and our own wholeness”) and the need for a more neutral and non-shaming theological sexual anthropology (“made as learners...lovers”) to facilitate sexual-spiritual integration (“sex is method, means and manner of becoming Person-Gift”). My thesis, deriving from the phenomenology of sex, is that human beings are inherently morally creative and that personal sexual expression is an arena in which poetic phronesis is engendered. Sexual development has a *telos* of identity/agency and relationship, and sexual encounters are borderlands where individual Christians may craft “faithfully realistic” sexual ethics in the encounter between self, other, God and the community. This is a graced poesis in liminal space driven by narrative sense-making, utilizing critical reflectivity and reflexivity, and funded by the stories, songs and symbols of the tradition and the presence of God.

After discussing moral creativity in Chapter 7, I will make the argument for sexual formation as poetic phronesis using the interviews as evidence.

CHAPTER 7: MORAL CREATIVITY

*I love you, gentlest of Ways,
who ripened us as we wrestled with you.*

*You, the great homesickness we could never shake off,
you, the forest that always surrounded us,*

*you, the song we sang in every silence,
you dark net threading through us,*

*on the day you made us you created yourself,
and we grew sturdy in your sunlight...*

Rilke, *The Book of a Monastic Life*, I, 25 (Macy and Barrows, 1996, 70)

We are “ripened” by God as we wrestle. My argument in this section is that moral creativity is inherent in the human being and that reflexive methods are essential to moral formation. The struggle to create “faithfully realistic” sexual ethics evidenced in the interviews (discussed in Chapters 8-10) testifies to the reflexive exercise of moral creativity. My search for the *veritas* of sex revealed a phenomenology of formation that wrestles the tragedy and tension inherent in human life to craft a poetic phronesis and create a moral life.

I draw my argument from Wall (2003, 2005a, 2005b), who derives his conception of moral creativity from Ricoeur’s “poetics of the will”. As discussed in Chapter 3, Ricoeur (1991b) posited identity to be narrative, with the story of one’s life an endeavour that is made and remade throughout one’s days. The “poetics of the will” is the individual’s “sustained effort to grasp the possibility for shaping one’s own meaning *within* the history and language by which meaning can only be shaped” (Wall, 2005b, 27).

Wall (2003, 323) writes that Ricoeur’s “hermeneutic of the self” allowed “him to take up the concept of phronesis”, the central Aristotelian virtue of practical wisdom that enables people to make ethical judgments and to choose right

means (*id.*, 319). In *Oneself as Another* (1992, 269, 273, 290), Ricoeur articulated “critical solicitude” as practical wisdom (phronesis) that comes about through “inventing conduct that will best satisfy” the reality of the existence of others who are irreducible and incommensurable with oneself. The ethical life is the responsive product of the self’s esteem of itself and of others as self-interpreting (Wall, 2003, 328).

Wall (2003, 333) appropriated and extended Ricoeur’s critical phronesis as a poetic process – practical ethical wisdom that is a making. I extend this usage to include subjective expression as an element of the phronetic process, given the discussion in Chapter 2.2 of the importance of attention to feeling that enables Christ and Eros to embrace in liminal space, the evidence of the interviews, and the efficacy of oblique, expressive methods for sexual-spiritual integration (Part Four).

Creativity is inherent in the human being made in the image of God and required because of the tragic nature of human existence (Wall, 2005b, 5, 20; 2003, 333). Each of the major thinkers on whom I rely view life as tragic. Ricoeur posits the tragic as “the situation of selfhood within the community of singular others” (Wall, 2003, 326). For Wall, tragic human existence consists in the tensions in which we necessarily live: between finitude and freedom, self and otherness, passivity and agency, “*being narrated* by one’s social conditions and *narrating* them for oneself” (Wall, 2005b, 20). Farley (1990, 29) articulates the tragic as “the most general feature of our human condition”:

The term “tragic” refers to a situation in which the conditions of well-being require and are interdependent with situations of limitation, frustration, challenge, and suffering. Human condition is not tragic simply because suffering is an aspect of it but because sufferings of various sorts are necessary conditions of creativity, affection, the experience of beauty, etc.

The tragic arises from our limitations, the vulnerability of our bodies and our sense of ourselves, the otherness of others, and the hunger for harmony and the

Holy. Our existence is effortful: “the penultimate fulfilments of our efforts both offer and withhold, satisfy and frustrate, promise and betray” (Farley, 1990, 123).

The tragic also compels our phronetic formation, particularly through the alterity of others (Farley, 1990, 39-43; Ricoeur, 1992, 352). Farley (1990, 42) writes of “a reciprocity of autonomies”; Ricoeur (1992, 269) of the “exception on behalf of others”. In the liminal space of an encounter with another, the moral self is formed and exercised.

This then is the fundamental foundation for moral formation: encounter and reflexivity built on self-esteem that is other-regarding. Moral agency is not a matter of simply applying a rule or formula to a situation. Moral agency is taking responsibility for one’s actions and the consequences, creatively exercising one’s agency in response to another. Poetic phronesis consists of re-creating one’s own narrative identity as a response to others, cultivating a practical wisdom that is morally responsible.

What is the role of the Christian tradition in poetic phronesis? The tradition provides the symbols, stories and metaphors which fund the self’s narrative identity; the individual appropriates the tradition creatively as she takes it into her own story (Ricoeur, 1991a). This is a richer contribution than that conceived of in Christian sexual ethics that are focused on rules that prohibit genital acts. The reduction of Christian sexual ethics to the application of rules about behaviour ignores the complexity and capacity of human life, which calls forth and requires moral creativity.

Moreover a focus on external rules appears to stunt the capacity for poetic phronesis. Timmerman (1993, 15) posited that a “prohibitive mentality” towards sex “stimulates [the disorderly impulse] through false guilt and the lure of the forbidden.” Bancroft (2009, 332) reports that religion can undermine self-regulation: “highly restrictive attitudes to sexuality can result in the inability to conform, starting off a cycle of guilt, pain and compulsivity.” Lynd (1958, 209, 230) observed that a personality built on rule following is

inherently unstable. Lorde (1994, 78) noted that “we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense” when we live “from within outward” rather than from external directives only. And Kierkegaard concluded that acting, in fear and trembling, out of personal conviction rather than according to external authority, one reaches a full comprehension of oneself and the moral life (Graham et al., 2005, 180). It is poetic phronesis –the integration of a view of self and others in the life of God– that facilitates the formation of identity and moral agency.

Thus traditional Christian sexual ethics which focus on *thou shalt not*, prohibiting specific genital acts, are potentially inhibiting of sexual moral formation. Salzman and Lawler (2008, 93-97) criticise this “act-centred morality” as mechanistic and contrary to Rahner’s theological anthropology that posits the person as both free and historical. Alongside theological anthropology, Christian sexual ethics need re-visioning, a task a number of theologians have undertaken in recent years (see, e.g., Thatcher, 1993; Gudorf, 1994; Farley, 2006; Thatcher, 1999; Ellison and Thorson-Smith, 2003; Heyward, 1989). In my teaching, after examining what the Bible and tradition say about sex in the contexts in which they arose and exploring sexuality’s multifaceted influences and link with spirituality, I invite my classes to write a Christian sexual ethic for twenty-first century Britain. In all but one occasion (discussed in Chapter 12), the efforts have been holistic, person- and relationship-centred, and framed with a view to the potential of sexuality to be sacramental.

In Chapter 10.2, we will meet interviewee “George” who struggles to live according to the traditional Christian sexual ethic of no sex before marriage. George observed that “neither the anything goes or the judgmental black and white actually meet people where they are.” Wall (2005b, 194) also identifies these two poles in religious ethics as insufficient:

Religious ethics goes astray...when it becomes either a merely subjective expression of private beliefs, or, by contrast, the embodiment of an authoritative community that imposes social norms from above. These

twin temptations arise out of the false alternative that moral life is grounded in *either* freedom or finitude, agency or passivity, selfhood or historicity – and not their inherent tensionality with each other. From a poetic point of view, ethical subjectivity and ethical objectivity are both ultimately antihumanistic. True ethical wisdom lies in the endless tension between them that calls humanity toward its own ongoing creative renewal.

Sexual formation, I argue, is the cultivation of a self that is self-affirming, other-regarding and reflexively responsible in its sexual expression – the work of poetic phronesis. Cultivation of the self is central to the formation of moral Christian life; this is at the heart of virtue ethics and Edward Farley's desire to restore the cultivation of *habitus* as the unifying principle of theological education (Farley, 2001; MacIntyre, 2007; Murphy et al., 1997; Keenan and Kotva, 1999). Wall, MacIntyre (2007, 148-155), Farley and others draw on the Aristotelian concept of phronesis as the central virtue that enables a person to flourish. Salzman and Lawler (2008, 138) offer the virtue of chastity –defined as successful integration of sexuality lived out in fidelity and commitment– as the goal of sexual formation. Poetic phronesis offers the conceptual means by which such virtues may be cultivated through self-esteem, encounter with others, and the personal appropriation of Christian stories, symbols and values.

Virtues are recognised to be a more fruitful way to understand the nature of moral learning than rules, given the way the human brain works and the lasting changes that come about by the practice of a virtue (Murphy, 1997, 40-41). Do rules have a place in an ethical framework premised on the cultivation of virtues? MacIntyre (2007, 150-153) answers in the affirmative, as does Murphy (1997, 39). Radcliffe (2005, 103-104) argues in regard to sex that rules are not enough:

ethics is not about what is permitted or forbidden, but seeks to articulate the meaning of what we do.....it is not enough for the Church just to insist on the rules. We need rules, of course, but they make no sense unless

one has at least some initial glimpse of the Christian meaning of sexuality.

MacIntyre (2007, 121, 150) observes that in classical cultures, “the chief means of moral education was through the telling of stories”; “there is relatively little mention of rules anywhere in [Aristotle’s] *Ethics*.” This too was the way of Jesus. An understanding of the narrative identity and moral creativity of the self argues for an approach to sexual formation which fosters esteem for self and others, recognises the developmental nature of sexuality and spirituality, articulates a Christian view of sexual expression as being Person-Gift, and cultivates reflexivity. While guidelines may be helpful (see, e.g., Balswick and Balswick, 2008, 155-159) and rules are necessary to protect the vulnerable, reflexivity is the key to moral agency.

“Goodness,” Walton (2007, 73) observes, “is not something we possess and others lack. Rather we can view it as a fragile construction heroically crafted in the midst of compromising circumstances.”

CHAPTER 8: I AM AND I CAN – THE *TELOS* OF IDENTITY AND AGENCY

In the interviews sexuality was revealed to be an integral part of the person which develops over time. Consistent with *Figure 2*, the development of the interviewees' sexuality was impacted by myriad factors: parental and peer attitudes, experiences, gender, community and religious context. Yet despite myriad influences, the development of their sexuality had a direction, a joint *telos*: towards identity/agency and towards relationship. This chapter explores the former.

8.1 *DEVELOPING A SENSE OF SELF: SEXUAL AND BODY AWARENESS*

Becoming aware of one's embodied existence is foundational to being a self (Sharma, 2011, 87). Sexual being is embodied (Williams, 2002a, 312) and sexual awareness a capacity which develops over time. The interviews illuminated the obstacles and opportunities to the development of a sense of sexual self.

Sexual development begins in the womb. In the first year of life infant boys and girls discover their genitalia along with the rest of their bodies (Greenberg et al., 2002, 390). Awareness of sexual being, of having attractions, appears later. Three of the interviewees became aware of nascent sexuality between the ages of six and eight, consistent with the theory that human brains develop "love maps" by age eight that portray a picture of the idealised romantic and sexual partner (Greenberg et al., 2002, 398 quoting Dr. John Money).

Children are curious about sexuality and may engage in sex-related play (Greenberg et al., 2002, 396-397). The extent of their knowledge is highly contingent upon the attitudes of significant adults in their lives and their experience with playmates. This continues into adolescence. In the interview cohort, parents were a poor source of information, perhaps providing information on the biology of reproduction but also communicating strong discomfort. One woman remembers, age seven, asking her parents why David sleeping with Bathsheba made a baby:

I remember this vividly... my dad turned to my mother and said “you tell her”. She turned to him and said, “no, you tell her”. And then they had this argument about who had to tell her... and I remember thinking “oh, this is going to be good”. [laughter] But again, the message was “we’re really uncomfortable talking about this”.

Friends and books were more reliable and comfortable sources of information. A middle-aged man remembers reading *Sex Manners for Men* under the bedclothes:

I studied that much harder than any school book, I think....I can still visualise this book. I think I got it from my friends at school when they left.

Sexual exploration: ignorance is not bliss

For the middle-aged women interviewed, ignorance was not just of sex but of their bodies.

Put it where? (age 14)

First blood.

In the summer, of all times!

The swimming bath beckoned.

Mum handed me a tampon,

‘Just put it in.’

I spent what seemed hours

in the pink bathroom

frantic

near tears

digging around the nether regions,

tangled skin and hair,

is this ragged bit a hymen?

unable to figure out

where it went.

I shoved

it disappeared

into the dark moist unknown.

Would I ever be able

to find it again?

Grosch-Miller, 2010

The shared recognition of this experience led to hoots of laughter between interviewees and interviewer. We had no idea where our vaginas were and scrutinizing the instructional diagram was no help at all. Drawings of female innards –uterus, fallopian tubes, vagina– make no sense when you cannot see them in your own flesh (and you think you are not supposed to look).

In those days, female ignorance extended to male sexed bodies:

...I remember the first time I saw It,

a bulbous protrusion from dark hair.

It was like nothing I had ever seen before

and nothing I could have imagined.

I walked around school for weeks afterward,

stunned by the realisation that

every boy in the building had one of those.

I could scarcely take it in.

I knew these boys,

their pimply skin and gangly legs,

their showing off and preening insecurity;

they all had one of these?

*How could such a remarkable fact
have been kept from me all these years?*

Grosch-Miller, 2010

Adolescence catapults many into sexual exploration which featured as an important source of information for all of the interviewees. All of the men interviewed began masturbating around age 13 or 14 and all but one of the women began masturbating then or later. This is consistent with research that indicates that a greater percentage of males masturbate than females (Geary and Greer, 2010, 74, 78-81; Greenberg et al., 2002, 337).

Not unusually (Geary and Greer, 2010, 78, 85-87, 89-90), the experience was tainted with guilt for some who had religious upbringing:

I can remember that the first time was very, very intense, and feelings of both wow, and also guilt....because this was that kind of secret, shameful, and probably also because I didn't fully understand it...here I am a Christian guy and should I be thinking about this, should I be doing this?
(Male)

I remember trying to give it up for Lent once. [laughter] I thought oh this was bad. In the end...I was thinking bloody hell, everyone else is having sex....so I just worked out that that was just what you did to release all that tension, cuz you know I'm quite a sort of physical person and I probably really have a high sex drive.... (Female)

Yet female masturbation in particular enables significant knowledge about female orgasm. More than one woman commented on the initial difficulty of identifying orgasm until, that is, it happens:

*I didn't know what I now know:
that orgasms are like sighting Everest.
When the clouds lift
and you finally experience It,
there is no doubt in your mind.*

But until that moment,

you keep wondering:

Was that it?

Or that?

Grosch-Miller, 2010

Another woman reflected that “it took me some time to be successful at achieving orgasm from [masturbation]...It was very clear when I did [laughing]...and then it got better....I worked out what was good and what wasn’t, and all that kind of stuff.” When she became sexually active with an inexperienced partner, she was able to share her knowledge. Given that the majority of women do not experience orgasm from vaginal intercourse alone (Greenberg et al., 2002, 522; Gudorf, 1994, 65), this knowledge can foster a couple’s sexual pleasure (Gudorf, 1994, 92). Gudorf (1994, 93) argues that this kind of knowledge engenders moral agency.

Masturbation can, however, become problematic particularly among men. The relatively recent availability of internet pornography and cybersex has made sexual stimulation available at the click of a mouse. Geary and Hone (2010, 285) write about the internet as “the crack cocaine of sex”, fostering an addictive rush that is difficult to give up (see also Friberg and Laaser, 1998, 42). One of men interviewed reflected on online porn:

It’s so easy to get a hold of and you know I know of very few guys who’ve not struggled in this area in some way...you hear 70% of guys, it doesn’t surprise me. I don’t think 70% are addicted, but the trouble with it is that it becomes addicting.

The first time I invited ordinands to bring pastoral sexual issues into the classroom, internet pornography took up most of the time and a handful of the male students spoke about their struggles with it. Female students named body image as their significant issue. There is a connection: male exposure to “standard, non-violent” pornography may lead to increased callousness towards women, distorted perceptions about sexuality, and decreased satisfaction with

partner sexual performance and physical appearance (Geary and Hone, 2010, 288). It appears that the prevalence of online porn viewing by adolescents is significantly shaping young people's sexuality in alarming ways (Channel4, 2009).

Not for the last time, gender appears as a significant factor in sexual development. Social and cultural expectations of male and female behaviour impact strongly on an individual's experience and expression of their sexuality. We learn our sex, socially and cognitively (Bancroft, 2009, 144-146), and this learning happens in a gendered world (Greenberg et al., 2002, 178-207).

School daze

Single-gender boarding schools created particular cultures regarding sex and gender including the possibility of homoeroticism and misogyny, as three interviewees experienced.

One of the men reported homosexual experimentation among students:

My housemaster who was an ordained clergyman was famously quoted as saying "I don't mind a bit of mutual masturbation but I draw the line at buggery".

Such experimentation struck the man as "extremely average at that age", and so it appears to be among boys, though not girls (Gagnon and Simon, 1973, 52). For this man, while it was comforting, it showed him he wasn't gay although he could "perfectly see and understand that it palpably floats a lot of people's boats." This experience and having a gay family member contributed to his acceptance of homosexual sex as normal. Such acceptance is the product of poetic phronesis.

Another man attended a school the headmaster of which

was almost an Evelyn Waugh type public school headmaster, he disapproved of girls thoroughly as distracting from academic work – it was just a bad thing. [laughing]

He described the school as a “totally sexless environment, or at least absence of any sex that is healthy”. He had no homosexual experience and reflected that “being cut off from female contact from the ages of 14 to 18 left us....quite clumsy and gauche in our dealings with the opposite sex.” The woman who attended a boarding school –a similarly described sexless environment where dating was not allowed until the headmistress interviewed and approved the boy– manoeuvred her expulsion. She then attended a college where she had “a whale of a time....discovered boys, discovered parties, discovered fun”.

Among the interviewees, four had their first sexual experience with another person during senior school; others had theirs during, or in one case after, university. In general, university was a time of enhanced exploration and learning:

I was at university. We went out, I took people home, all of that business, like most students. [laughs] ...I didn't want a boyfriend or any commitment at that time, I just wanted to be myself and do my own thing, not have any ties. (Female)

[University was] if you like a fairly busy time. This was...the back end of the swinging sixties, the pill and long ago had it been the case that nice girls don't and nice girls did quite rampantly in those days and it was enjoyable and I learned a lot.... (Male)

The learning was multi-faceted: learning about sex, about self and others, about vulnerability and relationships, and about agency.

One of the themes connected with sexual expression during late adolescence (through university) is *rehearsing adulthood*. Sex was equated with adulthood: one man spoke of “losing his virginity” on his gap year as “tasting the fruits of adulthood.” A woman reflecting on an affair with a married lover when she was seventeen said “I enjoyed...the feeling of being so grown up.” Another woman recounted fantasies of married life and “the heady feeling of sharing a home in stolen moments...I tasted adulthood, adult womanhood, and I liked it.” Two interviewees reflected on the consonance in their spiritual and sexual lifelines,

how they were exploring vocation and sex as they grew towards adulthood. Sexual exploration is part of becoming an adult 'I'.

8.2 AGENCY: THE KNOWING AND VALUING OF SELF

'I am' and 'I can' are intimately related. One of the hallmarks of adulthood is having agency: being in control of one's body and making choices about what to do with it. The focus interview for this section is with "Susan", a woman who reflected on her first sexual experience beyond kissing at age nineteen. Susan's adolescence was full of feelings of "why does no one fancy me?" While at university, she met a Christian young man with similar interests. Here she describes their sexual encounter:

I didn't really enjoy it. I felt uncomfortable with it and afterwards it made me want to kind of wait until marriage. Um, because the worst thing was....He pushed my head down and I was like I don't want this to go wrong, he's had a girlfriend, but I felt kind of ashamed and embarrassed, not that I'd given him a blow job but that *I hadn't felt in control of myself*. That I was meant to be a woman who could deal with this, who's independent....and *I just kind of let it happen*, and ...if I'd have said "no" I'm sure he would have said "that's OK" cuz he wasn't a horrible person at all. I have a memory of looking at him look at himself in the mirror. I didn't quite understand. I was nineteen; it was a big thing because I'd wanted a boyfriend for so long...and somebody actually fancied me and all of that stuff. But yeah, it put me off sex for a bit. I think it must have been after him that I learned how to get an orgasm through masturbation (emphasis added).

Susan had attended one of my courses and used this event as the focus of reflexive writing. She wrote the following cinquain, which reveals the strength of the emotions hinted at in her interview:

blowjob
first, naïve
pushed, kneeled, held
powerless, ashamed, repulsed
secret

Asked what it felt like to write this, she said

It felt good to have it tangibly somewhere, to be expressed was helpful.
After that, I felt like I wanted to go and talk to somebody about it.

After university Susan began dating an older man. She paced their sexual interactions:

I think we got up to the stage of having oral sex, and I said, “Look, I’m not really ready to do more. I’ve never done it before – you’re just going to have to wait it out on this one”.

In a chance encounter with her former university chaplain, she consulted with him:

We had a talk about when it was right to have sex, sexual intercourse, and he gave me the advice: do it with integrity; know that you’ve made the decision and that that decision’s yours, you’re owning it and you don’t feel pressured and you don’t feel rushed.

When the time was right she decided to have sexual intercourse. Although the relationship eventually ended, she did not regret her decision. When Susan met her next partner she took full responsibility for herself, getting STD tests, procuring birth control, and pacing the level of sexual interaction until she was ready. Discussing her personal sexual ethic, she said: “I’d have to be in control of what it is I’m doing....it’s not about being controlling in sex but being in control of when I decided to do it.” She reflected when prompted that her initial experience had some kind of effect on wanting to make sexual decisions “with

integrity". Susan's personal sexual ethic was a poesis crafted in significant part through her experience.

Susan's story illustrates the pull of sexual involvement and the formative power of early sexual experiences. Note the construction of identity – "I was meant be a woman who could deal with this, who's independent" – and the emphasis on agency and choosing with integrity. Note too that there was a direction in her agential development: towards identity and towards integrity. Sexual development has a *telos*: I am and I can – identity and agency.

My story reveals a similar development. For years I considered my first sexual experience to be "under duress" until I reflected more carefully upon it. Not quite sixteen, I was ignorant of the mechanics of intercourse and birth control. My autoethography revealed that before I gave in to pressure to have intercourse, the boy's "desire gave me power...I was important, in control, wanted." I remembered the moment I decided:

I don't know what got into me that day.

*One moment I was walking through town,
erect posture, full of power and agency,
deciding that today just might be the day.*

*The next, I was half naked on the blue sofa
after the short sharp thrust
that ended my innocence
and bled away my illusions.*

I had chosen, but I felt it had been under duress.

For years, even decades, I believed that...

*Until I remembered my own preening,
the swaggering choice
that put me on that couch.*

As much actor as acted upon,

*I had to own up,
remember rightly,
and claim the power
of my detached and curious desire.*

Grosch-Miller, 2010

I am older than “Susan” and was raised in a more restrictive, gender-rigid culture. My upbringing did not lend itself to thinking of myself as an independent actor; owning up to my agency took considerably longer.

No man interviewed considered his first sexual experience to have had an element of external pressure. One man reflected that his desire to have sex for the first time shaped how he approached young women:

I hit the age of sixteen and I thought OK now I’d like to have sex...show me the time and place....and it didn’t happen, and I got to university and...there was just this kind of thing of “I want sex!” so you’re kind of wearing that on the front of your head,...every time you engage with um a girl,...in that first term I think, I wasn’t coercive, but in some situations several different girls... I’m sad looking back that my agenda was purely sexual, yeah, I’m interested in you, of course, but because that assumed such a disproportionate ah ah need if you like...

Women are more likely to have early sexual encounters that are at least partly pressured. All of the female interviewees reported sexual or sex-related experiences where they were manipulated by men with more power (age, status, role or resources). This is consistent with British research reported by Bancroft (2009, 196) that women were “twice as likely as men to regret the first occasion [of intercourse], and three times more likely to say that they were the less willing partner”. Interestingly, none of the women I interviewed reflected that their experience was related to their gender. As Friberg and Laaser (1998, 47) note, our gendered culture “sets us up for a certain mismanagement in the area of our sexuality.” They quote an interview with Rutter (1989): “Many women don’t even perceive boundary violations because they’ve accepted

[them] as the standard way society works.” Again gender raises its head as an important factor in sexual development.

The connection is to be made: reflective ontology reveals the sexual arena to be one where one learns one’s agency. That the sexual arena enables the learning of agency among women is underscored by Sharma (2011), who interviewed young Christian women aged eighteen to twenty-five living in Britain or Canada. Agency is a recurrent theme in Sharma’s work; she describes young women making complex agential decisions about how to live out Christianity and sexuality, negotiating the tensions between church teaching and secular understandings of sexuality (2011, 22, 47). Drawing on Sawicki, Sharma (2011, 77) defines agency as “the ability to choose among discourses and practices that are available and to utilize them creatively...and the ability to reflect upon the implications of these choices lived within various relations of power.” She reflects that for young women enacting agency is complex: “difficult to navigate, negotiate and sustain and often encompass[ing] both acts of accommodation and resistance.”

Premarital sex and cohabitation

Choosing to engage in sexual expression before marriage is an act of agency. All of those interviewed chose to engage in premarital sexual expression. Some had intercourse with a number of partners. Only one interviewee stopped short of sexual intercourse with any partner before marriage. This interviewee explained that as a young woman she didn’t want “to put herself outside” of her Christian community. Later on she and her fiancé did not have intercourse before marriage because of “circumstances”. She noted that she was “really glad we didn’t because it took us a long time to become sexually compatible.” While she does not at this point in her life hold to a ‘no intercourse before marriage’ ethic, she thinks she would say to people: “There might be reasons why you do want to wait and there might be good reasons why you feel nudged/prompted to wait.”

The prevalence of premarital sexual activity and cohabitation in the research cohort is consistent with research that suggests premarital sexual activity is common in Britain (Bancroft, 2009, 190-197).²¹ Four of the interviewees had experienced a period of cohabitation with a future spouse or someone else. This reflects the rising incidence of cohabitation in Britain from the 1970s (Bancroft, 2009, 205). Notably, for three of the cohabiters, the cohabitation occurred before significant involvement in a church. One man explained that the decision to marry came about because he and his partner wanted to have children “and linked with this I was going to church regularly by that time, so it was something that I wanted to regularise.” The influence of the religious community on sexual choices will be discussed in Chapter 10.2: *Wrestling the angel of communitas*.

Crises and development

Agency is further developed throughout adulthood. Each life stage throws up experiences and events that require revisiting one’s sexual attitudes and experiences (Gagnon and Simon, 1973, 74-77; Timmerman, 1993, 49-85). There are decisions to cohabit or marry, to become parents, to have an affair or to end a relationship. Attractions and distractions arise that challenge primary relationships. Health, ageing and trauma impact sexual expression. These and more test and try sexual understandings and spark adaptive learning, refining agency.

Among the interviewees, miscarriage, adultery and divorce were the most serious crises faced. Two of the women experienced multiple miscarriages and one man lost a child prenatally. All three spoke of the challenges of navigating the loss. Three of the men had experienced divorce, which for each of them occasioned significant reflection. For the two whose partners left them, the experience was exceedingly painful and the reflection was immediate and

²¹ The median age at first intercourse for British men was sixteen and a half years while the median age at marriage was twenty-four; for British women, the median ages were seventeen and a half and twenty-two respectively (Bancroft, 2009, 190).

deepened as time went by. For the other man who left his spouse, reflection came more slowly. In the case of adultery, the four interviewees who had relationships where one of the parties was married to someone else wrestled painfully to understand how the relationship had happened and what it meant. These events were profoundly shaping of sexual self-understanding and moral agency. This will be further discussed in Chapter 10.3: *Wrestling the angel of other as self*.

Agency and emotion

In Chapter 2.2, I argued that emotion and bodily feeling were important in the liminal space where Christ and Eros meet. The emotions Susan captured in her cinquain –powerlessness, revulsion, shame– fuelled the development of her agency, consistent with Sharma’s (2011, 73) observation that emotions move through bodily processes and are a source of agency.

Stephen Pattison (2000, 22) reviewed the literature on emotion and concluded that “there is no universally agreed definition of what an emotion is.” Yet our experience of emotions is that they are embodied (Nussbaum, 2001, 64).

Delight is felt in the body, as is distress. Shame courses through the body, as does love. Fear floods the body, as can joy. Nussbaum (2001, 31) conceives of emotions as “eudaimonistic”, concerned with the person’s flourishing. They alert, protect, prepare, motivate and enable a person to know what is of value and to make decisions on that basis. Brain research shows that emotion and reason are interdependent (Taylor, 2001).

Emotional knowledge is instrumental in agency, as evidenced in the interviews. One woman described her initial attraction to the man who would become her husband: “My attraction to [him] was physical, palpable, the heat spread up from my groin towards my chest.” Such attraction compelled agency seeking sexual relationship. A man who lost his first child through miscarriage used the energy of that pain to volunteer with a miscarriage organization. Another who experienced divorce “felt destroyed” when his wife left: “my life collapsed and I had...to completely re-evaluate everything in my life.” The pain of the end of the

marriage spurred him into a journey of “deep personal exploration, self-awareness growing, God consciousness.” For another, emotional disconnect signalled marital breakdown and spurred serious wrestling; for others emotional connection was identified as the basis of a good sexual relationship. In Chapter 10.1: *Wrestling the angel of scripture and tradition*, we will meet “Ruth”, whose intense anger in time became empowerment and strength. She now considers her anger “to be an important aspect of what I know with my body.” She reflected on the process of making the piece of art that enabled her to integrate her sexuality and spirituality:

Allowing myself to write on my body in anger, allowing myself to feel again the hurt that the oppression of my body causes, and to physically act on it, allowing myself, my body to actually *do* what it feels in response to hurt and anger has been both liberating and terrifying for me.

For Ruth and others, emotion spurred and channelled agency, shaping identity and enabling poetic phronesis.

8.3 DIRECTION AND DYNAMISM: IDENTITY/AGENCY AND RELATIONSHIP

The *telos* of sexual development in the interviewees is distinct: towards the formation of identity/agency and, as will be discussed in Chapter 9, towards relationship. One woman was clear that she was not looking to be tied down in the beginning of her sexual exploration. The goal then was self-differentiation: “I just wanted to be myself.” After a period of exploration she married. Another woman reflecting on her early sexual relationships concluded that “I was separating from my parents...and what my morals were differently from my parents...and I was learning about my sexuality.” Later on she became focused on finding a life partner and did so. A man articulated his journey as one of increasingly productive intimate relationships aiming towards mutuality. And another described a progression in his capacity to have a mature, self-giving sexual relationship.

There is dynamism in this joint *telos* of identity and relationship. Our identity is formed in relationship – our parents’ sexual expression created our gene pool, and family, friends, community and culture shape us throughout our lives. Timmerman (2005, 579) posits that moments in sexual development are instrumental in causing “the shift from child to adult, alone to connected, consumer of emotional resources of humanity to generator of life and love”. She posits that “our identity –and this includes our sexual identity– grounds our ability to be faithful to other people and to values” (*id.*). She also argues that the development of our sexuality provides “rites of passage” that form us spiritually: our awareness of being sexual contributes to the spiritual task of self-knowledge and self-acceptance; perceiving the capacity and need for intimacy is “an essential component of adult sexual maturity” and a wellspring for the vulnerability and openness of interpersonal intimacy and intimacy with God; experiencing ecstasy or self-transcendence in sex, art, religion or movement “temporarily dissolves the boundaries of the self, so that one experiences part of a larger whole, then the boundaries are reconstituted in a new, hopefully enlarged sense of self”; and choosing commitment or love is often marked by religious or secular ritual – marriage, civil partnership, baptism, religious vows. Pregnancy and parenting provide additional opportunities for reconceiving sexuality and growing spiritually, and grief, change and loss provide “a school for tolerance for imperfection” and are occasions for reflection that can deepen and strengthen life and love (Timmerman, 1993, 49-85; 2005, 578).

Sexual development spurs and enables the formation of identity and the capacity for relationship with self, others and potentially God. Lynd (1958, 241) describes the joint *telos* as a dialectical process:

Openness to relatedness with other persons and the search for self-identity are not two problems but one dialectical process; as one finds more relatedness to other persons one discovers more of oneself; as the sense of one’s own identity becomes clearer and more firmly rooted one can more completely go out to others.

CHAPTER 9: ENCOUNTERING OTHERS – THE *TELOS* OF RELATIONSHIP

From the beginning

something in me knew...

some pulse began beating,

its rhythms urging me ever closer,

compelling me to orbit your presence.

I felt it in my bones,

in the soft skin inside my arms,

behind my knees;

I felt it in the moist dark place

that holds secrets.

I was moth to your flame,

reverberating ring to your bell,

never to be satisfied

until I was in your arms,

your skin taking its right place

next to mine.

Grosch-Miller, 2006

It is a hallmark of human sexuality that it drives the person out of herself or himself towards relationship with another (Thatcher, 1993, 48; Lawler and Salzman, 2011, 176-177). In the liminal space of interpersonal encounter, each person is vulnerable. This chapter will consider sexual vulnerability before exploring the interviewees' experience of the two ends of interpersonal sexual relating, bonding and procreation, which Christian sexual ethics have embraced.

9.1 *THE VULNERABLE 'I'*

Sexual vulnerability is inherent, emotional and embodied. It is inherent in that we are “no longer in charge” of who we are in a sexual relation: we are dependent on the other’s receiving of us (Williams, 2002a, 313). It is emotional in that sexual rejection or reciprocation impact our sense of self and capacity to flourish. It is embodied through our naked defencelessness in the sexual act and in our vulnerability to sexual violence. Timmerman (1993, 73) credits the vulnerability of an embodied sexual relationship with helping people “to see and show themselves without pretended strength or beauty or virtue” (see also Lawler and Salzman, 2011, 170-171). When we are sexually intimate with another, we are revealed not only to the other but to ourselves. Our vulnerability in sexual desire and expression is a liminal, creative space of encounter from which we emerge changed, our stories formed and re-formed.

The focus interview for this section is with “Maryanne”, who had an early encounter that strongly shaped the story of her body and sexuality. When Maryanne was starting to menstruate and home alone, she received a phone call:

This sort of pervert rang and asked me all these questions. And he started by posing as a researcher and asking me kind of easy questions, but they got progressively more horrible and a lot to do with periods and sanitary towels and tampons and things and my mother, and questions about her breasts and did I kiss her and horrible, really weird stuff, and I hung up at some point....but I could remember the questions, there was obviously a question at which I thought oh no this is really....but I went with it for a while and then I felt this huge sense of shame and self-blame that I hadn’t hung up earlier...

Maryanne had volunteered to be an interviewee at the start of a course I taught, quipping that she had nothing to offer. This memory emerged during the course. Surprised, she unpacked the memory by writing a poem. In the interview Maryanne said:

I was thinking about this again today, just before you came, and I actually had to do this exercise where I spoke to that twelve year old me, because she's still there....kind of bewildered and angry and not sure what the anger and the fear and the shame...that was good. That kind of talking to your earlier self I find quite a useful exercise sometimes and then bringing God into that conversation and allowing whatever God wants to do with it too.

I was surprised that it affected me so powerfully..... obviously *that was quite a moment when for me I just became very ashamed about my body and especially becoming a woman*, I think because he sexualised my mother's body and then my adolescent, pubescent body, I just thought 'uch, it's all yucky, it's all horrible'. [pause] *So then you spend the rest of your life unlearning that* (emphasis added). [laughing]

As an adult Maryanne experienced multiple miscarriages. In her talk with her twelve year old self, after reassuring her that what had happened was very unusual and that there were some sick people in the world, she spoke to her about menstruation being natural and curiosity being normal. Then she reflected more on blood:

So I talked to her like that and then...my mind turned to the fact that blood had become a kind of big issue for me, and so...it's interesting that that was sort of the first time that I really experienced blood as shameful.

I had multiple miscarriages and spent a long time bleeding, just in the way that you do after a miscarriage...now I'm pre-menopausal and again blood is a big issue....so it's still kind of this ongoing part of my sexuality actually has been to deal with what do I do with all the blood? It's not in the magazines or the movies or textbooks, ... and *it's hard to feel really positive, obviously, about your body if you're really bleeding a lot.....*when you have had [several] years of losing babies and then you've got to deal with the fact that you won't have ...the family you wanted, but also that your womb is a place of death, it's a tomb, and *it's a very big process to*

kind of come back from that into a place where you're really positive about your body and your sexuality and you can celebrate that it can be yeah a place of creation again somehow when it so manifestly hasn't worked in that way that you hoped it would. So part of what I was saying to that twelve year old was, you know, how this will develop – this will be something you'll have to grapple with, these feelings of blood and shamefulness. And also really a lack of control around those things (emphasis added).

Maryanne's story shows how she consolidated her learning and reframed the story of herself and sex over time, in the end exercising her imagination, entering liminal space into which she invited God, to integrate her twelve year old and adult selves.

Her story also reminds us that sex puts us in the body, our bodies and the bodies of our lovers. Blood, smells, sounds, semen, vaginal secretion, tumescence, flushing...there is no way to get around the fact of human sexuality being an embodied phenomenon. Maryanne reflected further:

*...health is really intimately connected to sexuality, and we tend to talk about sex and think "able-bodied people in good health", but for most people that's not their whole life. And for many people their whole life is being disabled or unhealthy, and so *there's an awful lot of coming to accept your physicality which for me has been the big project of my sexuality I suppose, 'project' doesn't sound quite right, but um I'm not sure I can be at ease with sexuality unless I'm at ease with my body.* And that's not been easy. [laughs] But I guess the grace of a marriage is that it encourages someone to just accept through all those, the sickness and health line is really important (emphasis added).*

Maryanne's experience moved her into the sacramental branch of the church; she needed a positive experience of blood and to be held by ancient tradition.

Near the end of her interview, she said

...there's a whole story about becoming more –this takes so long– to
become more happy with my body. [I am now] feeling much, much more,
much more accepting of my body and my physical self.

Over time, Maryanne constructed a redeeming story out of the vulnerability of her body and her encounter with others (a “pervert” and her husband), aided by the stories, symbols and rites of her faith and the presence of God. Such storytelling is a graced exercise of poetic phronesis. I wrote this poem to capture Maryanne's journey:

In the body.

*That's where it begins,
not in the head.*

*In the body that bleeds,
that struggles and strives,
in the vulnerable body,
the body that cries,
the body that aches.*

*“Creation is a bloody business.”
Muck and mess,
overflow and expulsion,
rhythm and rest.
In the body.*

*The chalice is shared in the body,
the body accepted and accepting,
the body cherished and cherishing,*

the body freed and freeing.

Love is born

in the body.

Grosch-Miller, 2011

Our vulnerable embodiment also allows for fecundity, for the creativity of loving acts that bind lovers or create new life.

9.2 CLEAVING

Bancroft (2009, 3) considers the binding and intimacy-fostering effect of sexual expression as the most positive non-reproductive aspect of sex. He believes that the shared experience of pleasure strengthens a relationship and that “the vulnerability inherent in sexual interaction [is] equally, if not more, important.” He (*id.*) explains:

To enjoy sex requires us to let go, to become abandoned to a degree, undefended... For humans, it is not physical but psychological or emotional hazards that are most likely – the risks of being exploited, rejected or humiliated. These are some of the bad consequences of sex. But to be able to expose oneself to such a risk and yet remain safe reinforces the feelings of security in a relationship, and has a binding effect.

To explore the binding and procreative effects of sex, our focus interviews will be with “Genevieve” and “Robert” and we will revisit Maryanne.

Genevieve’s story is shaped by a feeling of being “unsettled” and “rootless”. Once she got past an exploration stage, she “desperately wanted to get married and have children.” The feeling was so strong that she prematurely got engaged to be married. The engagement ended when Gen moved away to pursue further education.

Reflecting on a first marriage which failed, Robert mused that his decision to get married was shaped by being part of a social group of young marrieds and that

his wife-to-be was “keen to settle down”. Significant differences in social background and aspiration and his infidelities contributed to the failure of the marriage. He travelled for business in a work culture that encouraged casual sex:

There would almost be a, not a competition, but you know, “what do you fancy tonight?” sort of thing you know, “who are you going to be with?”. So there was a certain amount of that, and I’m not proud of it... It had its sort of immediate gratification and it hastened the destruction of something which was probably doomed anyway, but maybe that’s putting too [pause] maybe in saying that I’m trying to polish it up a bit and make it sound better than it was. But actually it was very destructive, whether it was destroying something that deserved to be destroyed or not, it was certainly destructive of trust and it was an act of deep misloyalty [*sic*].

As purposive as sexual expression may be to the formation of a secure committed relationship, so too the breach of fidelity through sexual activity outside the relationship is highly destructive. This demonstrates the importance of vulnerability in the binding effect that Bancroft posits.

Genevieve’s and Robert’s stories indicate that the unitive *telos* of sex may be a strong motivator for sex and for marriage, in some cases pushing people into marriage before they are capable of living up to its promise. And those promises are significant. All of the interviewees who are currently married spoke positively about the benefits of marriage. Genevieve looked back on her premarital life and saw “a search for love, a search for someone with whom I could share my innermost person”. She found that person in her husband, who she describes as having been “incredibly supportive” through difficult times. She credits her marriage as what enables her to understand “about security and love”, even God’s security and love. Robert, too, described his current marriage and sexual relationship as fulfilling and supportive:

I think that one of the things that is making me spiritually fruitful is the fact that I have a fulfilling sexual relationship with [my wife].... It's a platform of happiness on which I can build the rest... We find that the sexual aspect of our relationship is very important. And we find it very constructive, and we find it very therapeutic for our differences or for our worries and so on, and I think it is immensely supportive of everything in our relationship and what each of us is trying to do in our broader lives.

Maryanne, who had a long journey to accept and celebrate her sexual embodiment, reflected:

I'm very very lucky that I married [my husband], and that's been hugely redemptive, although not straightforward, but incredibly redemptive just the sense that somebody totally accepts me, despite all these things I've been through which are considerable and could certainly... crack other marriages.

She extended her reflection to the potential good of marriage for society:

I don't want to be smug married. ... but I do want to say to people "[marriage] is really a worthwhile thing to engage in if you can possibly manage it", because... *it seems like kind of a building block for society that you do open out from that relationship in all kinds of ways and all kinds of very productive ways you kind of sustain people around you.* I look at people with really good marriages and they are sustaining all kinds of other people, not just their biological children, unless that's how they've chosen to do it, but particularly where... they're in some kind of community, they're raising other people's children, you know, they've got their kids are bringing their friends around. We've had countless sorts of people semi-attached to us, you know, single mothers and their children, and um people who've had breakdowns, and people who are going through a divorce come and live with us...so you don't, it's not a kind of just romantic little bubble and actually I don't think it would last

that long if it was, but *the sense you have together, you're so much stronger than you are on your own* (emphasis added).

These reflections reveal sex to be a unitive force in intimate relationship and that such purpose is eudaimonistic, fostering the flourishing of individuals and potentially of communities. Moreover bonding may be served by differences between the genders or between individuals, requiring a level of communication, humility and humour that strengthens relationship. Another man interviewed said:

...the fact that men and women take different times naturally to come to orgasm, you know, I can't see any biological purpose for that, I can't see any reason why that should be selected for in evolutionary terms...but they are also what can give the opportunity for ... sex as perfect union of oneness.

On the same note, a woman contemplated the differences in sex drive between her and her husband and how long it took for them to become sexually compatible:

...we work at the relationship a lot. We work at the emotional stuff, the physical stuff, eh, it's just amazing how little you know when you get married that you're going to have to go through....

Marriage gives the gift of time (Williams, 2002a, 315). Maryanne reflected: "You just think, oh that's OK, we're married, so we have lots of years to work this out."

9.3 PRO-CREATING

The *telos* of relationship is fulfilled in a particular way in procreation. Through procreation, sexual expression fosters the survival as well as the flourishing of the human species. The biological fact of vaginal intercourse as necessary to reproduction is what gives sex its procreative purpose. As discussed earlier this fact has profoundly shaped Christian sexual ethics. And the ability to prevent procreation has profoundly shaped secular ethics, contributing to the sexual

revolution of the “swinging sixties” to which one man referred. While most sexual expression is not geared to procreation, when it is it can be very meaningful. Maryanne reflected further:

Our marriage has contained...lots of procreative sex, I’m grateful for that. It hasn’t worked, but ... that’s a different kind of sex which I think people don’t talk about...It’s really phenomenally moving when you make love and think this could be a baby, a new life, we could be making new life. That adds a huge dimension to the experience, and I never found it – I know there are people who say it takes all the romance out of it if you’re taking your temperature or trying to figure out when you ovulate, and I suppose I wasn’t that mechanical about it....I always thought this is so exciting, this is amazing.

The potential for procreation in vaginal intercourse between fertile partners should be a shaping factor in thinking about sexual intercourse according to Thatcher (1999, 132-170). Thatcher emphasises the centrality of children in marriage in his re-visioning of a postmodern theology and ethics of marriage. He envisions marriage as a communal partnership and mutually administered sacrament whereby the partners’ love for each other enables individual flourishing and their union of heart, mind and flesh. At the core of Thatcher’s (1993, 57) work is an understanding of the person as a ‘person-in-relation’, a concept implicit in the development of sexual being:

The theme of a person-in-relation, traceable to John Macmurray (1961) ... conveys the sense that ‘I’, from my conception onwards, am always in relationship-with-others, and it is through the history of my interaction with others that ‘I’ become whatever I am. I receive my existence from others; I am with others; sometimes I am for others.

We are persons in relation, our sex propelling us into encounters that shape and form us, and enable the creation of life and of life-giving relationships.

CHAPTER 10: WRESTLING ANGELS

The interviewees' poetic phronesis occurred in the liminal space where the individual wrestled their experience of selfhood, encounters with others, and the Christian tradition.

10.1 WRESTLING THE ANGEL OF SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Eve Falling

...

*I love the Fall of man,
the way it begins with a woman's mouth.
I love my own mouth beginning to say
the truth and then the silence, the aftershock,
I love the fall of presidents and kings,
the mad fall from power into a woman's arms,*

...

*I love the Fall, the way we are eased
out of Paradise gradually.
The way we begin floating
and give in so slowly to the earth.
I love the way it ends, and keeps ending.*

McVeigh (Sewell, 1996, 109-110)

McVeigh plays with the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall, conveying the journey to earthed knowledge through honesty and passion. The truth of human experience has required wrestling with Christian scripture and tradition among my interviewees. Each spoke about the struggle to bring together their sexual experience with faith teachings. The struggle was occasioned by guilt about masturbation, rejection for reasons of nonvirginity, the breakup of a marriage, having a gay friend or family member, and the desire for premarital sexual exploration. Each struggle presented an opportunity to integrate sexuality and spirituality and to create sexual phronesis.

“Ruth” wrestled scripture and tradition through the vehicle of a Feminist Theology course. She chose as a final project to create a piece of art exploring feminist body theology and sexuality. The artwork consists of a roughly 4’ x 7’ canvas (*Figure 3*) on which her body was outlined “to approximate the outline of a body in a crime scene” and to signal that it was being raised from the dead. On and around the body she sewed, glued, painted and wrote words. In the outline of her head she wrote: *This is the resurrection of my body....*and in the neck: *now let it speak* (artwork words italicised).



Figure 3

The accompanying essay begins:

In many ways, doing this project has surprised me. My reactions to my reading have surprised me – I did not realise how deeply I felt about some of the issues surrounding this subject, and some authors...have articulated for me some of my deeply felt yearnings, and my anger.

There is writing and printing on the inside of the body and strips of cloth – “bandages” – on the outside of the body on which are printed mostly biblical quotes denigrating the body.²² The bandages are hanging off, “a continuation of the theme of being raised from the dead...inspired by John 11:44: The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go’.”

The body appears to be wearing a tube top and pants made of spiky fabric “that has its itchy, hairy side on my ‘skin’... a modern version of camel hair... forced on me...stapled onto me.” These black bands contain “phrases I have heard said in churches to myself or other young women....they represent the fact that the bonds are still there.”²³ The word *fear* features heavily, written six times.

²²From Ruth’s essay: “The phrases on the bandages were almost all biblical quotes: ‘The woman will bear her sin’ Num 5:31; ‘The flesh is weak’ Mt 26:41; ‘While we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord’ 2 Cor 5:6; ‘Let not sin reign in your bodies, to make you obey their passions’ Rom 6:12; ‘If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live’ Rom 8:13. The only one not a quote is ‘your body is evil and will lead you to sin’ which I included because I feel that it represents something of the church’s perceived attitude towards the body.”

²³ The following words or phrases are written on the top band: *Lust; fear; no cleavage; uncontrollable; attraction; fear; she will ensnare you; fear; pleasure; cover up or you will provoke others to sin; ask the young women to wear more clothing on Sunday; NOT in church.* On the bottom band are written: *fear; if you must dance, don’t move your pelvis or hips; Christian women should not look sexy; fear; we don’t want to have to look at your midriff either; fear.*

About the words written inside the body, she wrote:

The words inside my body are partly representative of veins and arteries and therefore lifeblood, and in the case of the centre, the spiral represents both the “spiral of incarnation” (Isherwood, 2004) and an assertion that what I say comes from my gut, my emotions and not just from my head....I felt that if I could write on my body then perhaps it would be possible to tell my history from my point of view and to demand a different destiny to the one offered me by patriarchy.

Of the words in the body, two are biblical quotes: *Glorify God in your body* (1 Corinthians 6:20) and *The whole fullness of deity dwells bodily* (Colossians 2:9). The remaining words are hers: “It was important to me that all of the writing that was in my voice should be in my own handwriting.”²⁴

²⁴ Inside the head is written: *This is the resurrection of my body*. There is a photograph of Ruth’s eye in the head, the only photographic image in the piece, meant to “force the viewer to meet [my] gaze”. In the neck is written: *Let it speak*. Around the navel, there is a spiral of incarnation. In its centre: *God became Flesh* and outside the spiral *Glorify God in your body*. (1 Cor 6:20) The spiral reads: *This is a body that does not need your words to speak to God, NO, through its Moving and its Touching, through its forms and its Changes, through its Desires and Passions, through its Relating and Connecting, it knows God more fully than any words can say. Then to Worship God it needs nothing but itself – Yet you restrict its movements and tell it what is ‘Right’! Mine is a Sexual body in its relating to God too. In its relating to God who Became Flesh.*

The right arm says: *I am this body and I will BREAK off these bonds which have so long bound me. I will take them off, these bonds that have been as a SHROUD. You have pushed me down and Buried my Sexual nature.*

The left arm: *Let my body speak after you have silenced it so long. Do not turn away, but when you look see ME. I delight in my body and its desires, and my body delights in your body, and our bodies delight in God.*

The right leg: *The whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. (Col 2:9) Bodies are the Divine PRESENCE on earth. God reveals Herself through this body and through your body and through our bodies’ relationship. My body will decay, it changes, it’s in a process of becoming, I will decay, I change, I am in a process. GOD CHANGES.*

Ruth spoke of the act of writing on her body as liberating and terrifying. She said more:

I came out of the whole project absolutely angry, ragingly angry....But um I think that time has changed [pause] it started off as angry and it came out more as a kind of just feeling empowered and like stronger about things yeah. [laugh]

Ruth's artwork dramatically unmasks the sex/body-negative nature of church teaching and focuses our eyes on its impact. Her tools are experiential –her body speaks, it *knows God more fully than any words can say* through its *moving, touching, forms, changes, desires, passions, relating and connecting*– and her reflection is theological.

What Ruth's body knows of God is that *God reveals Herself through this body and through your body and through our bodies' relationship. Bodies are the Divine PRESENCE on earth.* She makes the leap from knowing that her body changes – *it's in a process of becoming*– to stating that *GOD CHANGES.*

The artwork is an act of agency; her right arm proclaims it:

I am this body and I will BREAK off these bonds which have so long bound me. I will take them off, these bonds that have been as a SHROUD. You have pushed me down and Buried my Sexual nature.

The process of art-making enabled Ruth to express and claim her whole self, facing distortions and working through the bondage of church teaching on sexuality, the body and women. Her reflexively-based body and sexual knowledge recalls Walton's (2007, 79-108) treatment of women's sexual

(Note 24 continued) The left leg: *I am not like the plastic Mary you have made – NOT meek and mild, not that Statue with her Shapeless Body and downcast eyes. I am more like the Real Mary whom you deny – a woman of desires and passions, a woman with a real, Sexual Body.*

knowledge as a form of spiritual wisdom in the work and lives of Roberts, Smart, Irigaray and Hillesum. About Hillesum Walton (2007, 103) wrote, “the body itself perceives the divine through its mechanisms”. In her essay Ruth discussed dualism in Christian tradition, a theology of incarnation, oppression, liberation, heterosexual normativity, and feminism in art. She wrote that while she had “journeyed significantly through the project”, she knew that she would continue the journey “developing my personal theology through my body.”

Ruth reflected in the interview that she “wasn’t quite up to writing ‘bisexual’” in the project although she had identified that possibility within herself. After she completed the project, she met the woman who became her life partner:

I do feel that...doing that had a lot to do with me...realising that I wanted to be in a relationship with her when I met her. And allowing myself that kind of thing.

Ruth’s story is a dramatic example of the reflexive wrestling project of integrating sexuality and spirituality that is poetic phronesis. She described the long process of making the piece using the words “massive awakening”, “liberated” and “empowering”.

Judith Glassgold (2010, 69) sums up the reflexive project of sexuality:

Sexuality and spirituality are narratives, which women explore and rewrite. Sexuality and spirituality do not have to be seen as predetermined essences...but as issues that go through a profound developmental journey.

...there is the relationship to the self, a relationship that evolves over time. As with all relationships, identity evolves, grows over time and ends up transformed.

Ruth’s wrestling enabled sexual-spiritual integration, affirming agency and preparing the way for committed partnership. Reflecting on Ruth’s story, I wrote this poem:

*This is what it is to wrestle with God:
To awaken to all that is in and around you
To name truths known in the body
and falsities imposed outwith,
To catch a song on the breeze
and lift first your head,
then a foot, to dance
TO OWN ONESELF
TO SPEAK
TO LOVE
TO BE*

*This is what it is to dance with God –
not locked in an exhausted embrace,
but ALIVE and enervated*

Grosch-Miller, 2010

I had in mind Epstein's sculpture of Jacob and the Angel in the Tate Liverpool:²⁵ an ecstatic, exhausted Jacob, head back, eyes closed, is held in the embrace of the angel, his genitals visible between the Divine's legs from behind. The sculpture speaks of heroic whole-bodied effort, and surrender and sureness in the divine hold. The Genesis 32 story has long held a fascination for me; struggling and striving is a hallmark of my spirituality. Now Ruth's piece captivated and empowered me. I wrote in my learning journal: "[Ruth's] artwork is far more enervating and claiming of agency, far more alive."

10.2 WRESTLING THE ANGEL OF COMMUNITAS

Ruth was aided in her wrestling by the community in which she lived. She described her college as "accepting", with a gay staff member and gay students. She said: "There was an openness to talking about [sexuality]; that atmosphere

²⁵ See <http://blog.tate.org.uk/?p=691> 14 June 2010. Accessed 27 February 2012.

was a positive influence.” As persons-in-relation, we are strongly influenced by our communities. It is widely accepted that our understanding and expression of sex is shaped by the communities to which we belong and the culture(s) in which we grew up and live.

Different communities and cultures have different sexual mores. Margaret Farley (2006, 57-108) reviewed diverse sexual understandings and ethics from around the world. She discovered that “there is not a univocal meaning for ‘sexuality’ across all cultures” (2006, 59). She concluded that the better the contexts are understood,

the most important factor that emerges may not be either difference or similarity. It may be the very plasticity of human sexuality, its susceptibility to different meanings and expressive forms. Not that it is infinitely malleable; nor that it matters very little how its meaning and practices are constructed; and not that it simply varies, despite similarities, from culture to culture. Rather, along with variety among traditions, what is striking is that any particular tradition’s internal understanding of sexuality and gender might have developed differently had there been some variation in particular circumstances (Farley, 2006, 104).

In other words, culture plays a significant role in shaping sexual attitudes and behaviours, and culture itself is plastic.

Negotiating cultures

Each of us exists in a web of cultures: the larger culture of twenty-first century Britain and the subcultures of family, community and church. British Christians are immersed in late Western capitalist culture which is increasingly secular and in which sex as self-gratification is a tool for consumerism. The focus is on the individual; sex is about genital pleasure and social success. In contrast, in biblical times sex was about procreation, property and the survival of the tribe (Countryman, 2001; Carr, 2003, 49-50; Grosch-Miller, 2008b, 12-14). Contemporary Christians feel the clash of values.

When it comes to Christian sexual ethics, my research reveals that in Britain there are Christianities – different subcultures that place Jesus at the centre. Nonetheless diverse Christians recognise a core ethic that limits sexual intercourse to heterosexual marriage as either the substance that is taught or assumed, or the shadow that is boxed. The sexual mores of one's Christian community shape the wrestling of sex and faith and the development of personal sexual attitudes and expression. Recall that one interviewee credited her choice to postpone intercourse with not wanting to put herself outside her Christian community.

The Christian community in which we live and the larger Christian ethos we imbibe shapes but does not, in the end, definitively determine our sexual expression. Some leave the church, for a time or forever. Sharma (2011, 42) notes that in Britain, Canada and the US, unmarried people have lower church participation rates. In my research, a man who had exhibited strong religious devotion while in school reflected that during his sexually active time at university, he felt he had put himself "beyond the pale":

...what I'd been taught about Church was that you didn't behave like that and sex was only within marriage.... the fact that I was very clearly not keeping to that, in fact slightly the opposite, put me in a position where it wasn't right for me to go to church.....if God was telling me that I couldn't do all these nice things that I was enjoying doing so much, um then I wasn't interested in him.

Some absent themselves, and others, like Ruth, wrestle the faith and re-imagine it (see, e.g., Sharma, 2011, 77-88; Yip, 2002; Webster, 1995, 163-185).

In this section, we will meet "George" and "Bruce", each of whom wrestles with Christian community and culture as they seek to create a faithful, life-giving sexual phronesis.

George and the clash of cultures

George grew up in and continues to belong to a traditional Church community. His interview illustrates the community shaping sexual expression and the clash of cultures which he felt keenly.

George has lived as a Christian his entire life. His faith life included what he called “a wilderness period” while he was in university:

I was struggling a bit with faith and God... but not in a conscious “I’m not sure”, there was a sub/unconscious thing going on. Some of it was related to me and my identity, who am I, what am I, and the discovery of [pause] some of it was theology, you know sometimes especially the first time you do it you get kind of taken apart and put back together.

It was during this period, which included travel and a time of “really spreading my wings”, that he had his first sexual experiences with women. While he did not explicitly connect calling the period a “wilderness” time with sexual exploration, his use of “wilderness” with its implication of temptation may reflect that he was acting outside the parameters of the Church. Later he described sex outside of marriage as “a relational sin”.

After his wilderness period, George met the woman he would marry. Their premarital sexual expression was limited to kissing and cuddling; they wanted to wait until marriage. The marriage was difficult and unhappy, emotionally and sexually. After a number of years, George’s wife moved out. George subsequently discovered that she had met another man. His wife pressed for divorce.

The language George used reflected the ideal that Christians do not divorce. Despite his recognition that the marriage had been miserable and destructive to his sense of self, he said:

I had an unhappy marriage and everything went on hold and unfortunately we never made it.

His use of “unfortunately” could have reflected the pain of divorce or his assimilation of the Christian expectation that marriage is for life. He also could have been assuming that I held that expectation, given that I am a Christian minister.

George’s description of the marriage focused on her personality and behaviour, a “depth of brokenness” he didn’t have the tools to understand and that triggered in him great self-doubt and impassioned prayer asking God to fix the problems. He found it “ironic” that it was she who pursued divorce; he wanted to try to work things out. He continued to pray for reconciliation for over a year. Only much later could he conclude that “God in his wisdom” did not enable reconciliation.

George survived the divorce: “God carried me, he carried me through...that real, deep, dark time.” He reported that it took three years for him to be put back together emotionally, a process significantly assisted by his participation in faith communities and post-divorce ministries. In time he met the woman he was now dating. He said that they shared some sexual expression (not intercourse), and that there was strong attraction and “a great deal of love”. He also said that they were struggling to keep to the line of no intercourse before marriage as a matter of being “right” with God and their relationship.

George reflected thoughtfully about their struggle, about the Church’s stance and about people in his position in the way society is structured now:

You have a mid to late thirties’ guy who is sexually mature, who has certain desires, um and I think that we live in this society now where, when the laws were formulated, people would be married in their teens, and so it wasn’t an issue, because you’d be married and that was the structure of society. Now we’re saying actually well don’t get married until your career is established. Well that can be twenties or thirties and people have been sexually mature for ten to fifteen years of their life already um, what does that mean for them? Have we got our society upside down? Are we out of rhythm with our physiological and sexual

rhythms? I think we are but then how do we then deal with that, and then how do we deal with those people like myself who at some point in their life become unexpectedly single, out of relationship, but still with desires and needs.....neither the anything goes or the judgmental black and white actually meet people where they are. I think it's a very, very difficult question.

George's story of his sexual life exhibits assimilation of traditional Christian sexual ethics: sexual intercourse is for marriage only and marriage is for life. Yet his actual sexual experience (which includes some young adult sexual exploration and divorce) and his wrestling with Church and culture suggest that a counter-narrative (Riessman, 2008) may be struggling to be born. This is the work of poetic sexual phronesis – work that is helped or hindered by the Christian community.

Bruce wrestles giants

A second interviewee, Bruce, was also shaped significantly by his Christian culture. His story underscores the power of culture shaping personality and the personal struggle to grow beyond it. I wrote this poem in contemplation of Bruce's story:

Wrestling with Giants

*Unto us a child is born,
unto us a boy is given.*

*The Pharisees have built a strong house to contain him,
lined the walls with rules and measurements,
made the chairs straight-backed and sturdy.
Few are the windows (to prevent distraction –
what we are about is of utmost importance).
Thin is the air (dust floats in the spare light
that spills between narrow slats).*

*The boy plays with blocks on the floor,
already aware that he is small,
too small;
poor,
too poor.
Impossibility weighs heavily.
Shame swallows Being.
The body cannot bear the weight.
The boy tries and tries,
invents new rituals and adopts ancient ones.
Being still buried alive.*

A tear falls from heaven.

*A different kind of Holy awaits revelation,
a Holy born in body and in breath,
a Holy borne on waves of light and invitations to dance,
a holey wholly Holy conversant with vulnerability
and with the struggling and striving of tender flesh
aspiring to love.*

*He cocks his ear.
The song on the wind carries the tune
his soul has longed to hear
for ever.
The song of the sacredness of Being
in the frailty of the body,
and of Love unthinkable
in the poverty of the imagination,*

*a song of Freedom and of Compassion,
a song of Power,
a song for All Flesh.*

He stands.

*Resurrection promises
to tear the house down.*

Being

breathes.

Grosch-Miller, 2011

Our sexual being, feelings and expression are expressions of our personality. Sex cannot be separated from the person, from the unique self we are and are becoming – a self created by the complex interaction of psychobiological and sociocultural factors, a self reflected in sexual being the way each bite of rock contains the name of the seaside town where it was purchased.

Raised in a rigid, authoritarian Christian culture, Bruce described his journey as a long struggle with deep-seated feelings of “insecurity”, of “being wrong”, “being something small, something not really good, not really beautiful”, of being full of “shame”. He identified these feelings as partly derived from “being judged as wrong by my father and....trying to be as [my mother] expected me to be, to be accepted.”

When Bruce became aware of feelings of attraction to girls between the ages of six and eight, “suddenly began a sense of self-humiliation, subordination.” His feelings of insecurity and being wrong shaped his emerging awareness of his sexual being, and as this awareness grew the “feelings of humiliation, subordination...became stronger and stronger”. Attending a Christian school, the rigidity of the rules and the idea that sex was a sin and “something dirty” fed into his “stronger and stronger sense of subordination, humiliation.” The way his sexuality was expressed was in idealisation of girls to whom he was

attracted. If they rejected him the idealisation became stronger as it fed into his deep belief of being wrong. The cycle fed on itself.

For Bruce the ages of fourteen through eighteen were “a period of strong, strong insecurity”. He developed rituals to try to find “something that would make me more secure”. This went alongside idealisation of a particular girl and feelings of subordination. He did not have a relationship with the girl because he “was really scared by all that meant being in an active sexual life.”

From ages eighteen to twenty-five,

Sexuality became really an obsession for me....especially the thought that I was unable to have a sexual relationship....feeling wrong, feeling insecure didn't let me have the possibility of a normal sexual relationship.

And sexuality became something really disembodied. I mean, a lot of thoughts about guilt, a lot of ideas, a lot of feelings of subordination, idealisation and so on, but not a living dimension. [I lived with] this big fear not to be able to have a sexual relationship.

During this time he could masturbate to climax, but he couldn't feel good about it. About the age of twenty-four or twenty-five Bruce began “to look at images of subordination, of slavery, of captivity and of humiliation and of focusing especially on feet.” At age twenty-five he met a woman who was happy to be idealised and in a nonsexual relationship. But he found that this was “very destructive”, proving he “wasn't good enough” and feeding his feelings of subordination and his habit of using debasing imagery with masturbation.

At twenty-seven Bruce met another woman. There was still idealisation but it felt more productive. When she decided not to pursue the relationship, however, his feelings of idealisation intensified. Again her rejection confirmed his deepest fear.

Fear continued to dog his sexual expression:

At age twenty-eight....my main obsession was to have my first sexual relationship, and I couldn't...because there was so much fear about it.....and at twenty-nine I had my first important relationship with a woman for two years. But even there the main problem was sexual ...because I tried to put in action something that could excite me, coming in my way of seeing it, so it was difficult...and at the end...I couldn't have a sexual relationship. At thirty-one, the woman decided to stop the relationship.

I had a depression about this...and now I have a new relationship...and I'm trying to live the relationship in a different way, and it's difficult sometimes. And with this fear about sexuality...I cannot think about sexual relationship without fear... it's a fear that's difficult to win and that's the reason it becomes a bit like an obsession.

...I realised that there's something more in deep, it's not something linked only in sexuality. In sexuality there's something about my personality that plays a role in this.... and now I feel really that I would like to be free from this...from all this bondage.

I don't really know how to deal with it, but I feel that the most important thing now is to try to live the relationship in a mutual way and see what happens.

One year ago I couldn't talk about all these things....and that's the reason I thought to talk about them to you...maybe it's time not to be so scared about myself.

Bruce made a connection between his personal feelings of insecurity, his sexual expression and the judgmental God he has been leaving behind for nearly two decades for a God of liberation:

There's a strong link in a life of insecurity and obsession and of feeling not to be welcome and to be wrong in a certain way. And on one side, trying to leave a judgmental God and...a spirituality of security, and on the other hand a sexuality of humiliation...linked with my sense of being small, insecure, wrong.

What he noticed at this point in his life is how hard it was for the body to catch up with the mind:

A really big problem is to let all these thoughts come into feelings, because I think I'm becoming more and more sure about what I'm saying. The problem is to deal with the body.....the first reaction of the body is more linked with the heritage it has, because it's the normal way to act.

Transformative learning theory, discussed at length in my literature review (Grosch-Miller, 2008a, 15-22) and further in Part Four, originally placed the greatest emphasis on critical reflection on frames of reference in the kind of learning that changes people's lives. While critical reflection has been essential for Bruce's journey towards a mutual intimate relationship, his body is moving more slowly than his mind and he is not certain whether and how long it will take for him to integrate his intellectual convictions into his sexual life. Poetic phronesis is not a purely cognitive process; we cannot will our bodies to behave in the way we think they should.

Sexual behaviour is learned during the long process of sexual development, but there are, especially for boys, crucial periods in that process. Bancroft (2009, 285) conceptualises sexual development as involving three strands –gender identity, sexual responsiveness, and the capacity for dyadic relationships– that are relatively independent until puberty when integration begins. Bruce's concerns are about the integration of the latter two strands. Bancroft (*id.*) reports that this integration may be more crucial in male development "because of the development of sexual attraction and the identification of sexually stimulating signals, in a relatively immutable fashion, at a critical stage in male development." The precise mechanisms involved in this stage of male

development are unknown; it may be that the penile erection is “a peculiarly conditional response” (*id.*, 283-284). Bancroft (*id.*, 284) concludes:

It remains a puzzle to the learning theorist why in some individuals certain specific stimuli become discriminately reinforced, whilst in most individuals there is a generalization of learning which allows sexual preferences to evolve and to mature with experience involving the whole person.

It is unknown how intransigent sexual arousal patterns may be or what complex brain processes affect the laying down of a pattern or the changing of it. Moreover, in his study of chronic shame, Pattison (2000, 156) concluded that “there are no easy solutions or infallible techniques” that reduce chronic shame.

At the end of the interview Bruce asked if I knew of any other resources that might help him. He had found Pattison’s *Shame* (2000) very helpful. My conversation with Bruce underscored the feeling that I have had throughout my research: that we walk on holy ground when we engage sex, be it with our minds, our bodies or in conversation. We are at our most vulnerable in this borderland. A thoughtless word, a careless gesture, a deaf ear.....any of these can decimate.

Shame and guilt

Bruce grew up in a Christian culture that shamed sexual being and expression. Shame and guilt around sex are part and parcel of the Christian community’s ordering of this part of human life, both disabling and enabling moral agency.

In *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, Pattison (2000, 44) notes the confusion between shame and guilt, writing that distinguishing between the two is “notoriously difficult” particularly in White, Anglo-Saxon, Nordic cultures. Nonetheless there is a distinction recognised in psychological research that is helpful in thinking about the construction of the self and moral agency. Baldwin et al (2006, 7) and Tangney and Dearing (2002, 18) quote Lewis (1971, 30) to distinguish between the two:

The experience of shame is directly about the *self*, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the *thing* done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but is not itself the focus of the experience.

Shame is about the self; guilt is about behaviour. Shame is about who I am; guilt is about what I did.

Tangney and Dearing (2002, 170) recognise that shame impedes intimate relating and observe that “without question, sex is a ‘hotbed’ of shame”. Their study of shame and guilt concludes

In brief, shame is an extremely painful and ugly feeling that has a negative impact on interpersonal behaviour. Shame-prone individuals appear relatively more likely to blame others (as well as themselves) for negative events, more prone to a seething, bitter, resentful kind of anger and hostility, and less able to empathize with others in general. Guilt, on the other hand, may not be that bad at all. Guilt-prone individuals appear better able to empathize with others and to accept responsibility for negative interpersonal events (*id.*, 3).

They anticipate psychological symptoms associated with a predisposition to shame, but not to guilt: “Guilt is a hopeful, future-oriented moral-emotional experience” (*id.*, 118-119).

Baldwin et al (2006, 16) come to a similar conclusion, finding a relationship between shame and self-efficacy. Describing self-efficacy as “the most potent means of agency that impacts a person’s psychological functioning” (2006, 8), they are unable to draw a conclusion about the direction or causality of the relationship. They expect that improvement in either aspect could positively affect the other.

Social philosopher Lynd (1958, 49, 71) also conceptualised shame as involved with the whole self as opposed to behaviours. Her assessment, however, is

more nuanced and optimistic. The whole-self involvement of shame makes it potentially revelatory to the self about the self, about the society and about the nature of being human. Lynd (1958, 230, 236) distinguishes between personalities formed around a guilt axis and those formed around a shame axis, and finds the latter more adaptive:

Individuals tend to find continuity in their lives either by means of basic emphasis on what others have taught them they should do and –more especially– should not do [guilt axis], or by means of emphasis of discovering their own lines of direction [shame axis]. Learning to know oneself is in part the ability to distinguish between these two ways of growth. In [American] society a person is inclined to be more specifically conscious of behaviour on the guilt axis, of transgressions that are culturally defined and redeemable, and of their counterparts that add up role by role to a righteous, mature, adjusted life. He can perhaps at relatively small emotional expense fulfil the requirements society makes of him. *But identity built on the guilt axis may be less enduring, more likely to break down into its parts.* If its loyalties are based mainly on social requirements, the sense of self may change if these requirements shift. *Identity based more on the shame axis may go deeper and be more of a continuous process of creation with less easily dissipated Gestalts.*it is the whole purpose of oneself and of one's society that invites re-examination in the light of [shame] experiences. ...Stubborn and minute control is replaced by the unfolding of the spirit (emphasis added).

...to a person who lives and views experience primarily along the guilt-righteousness axis, other persons tend to be primarily external and instrumental to himself or...he instrumental to them.... To a person oriented more to the shame-identity axis, other persons, the They, or at least some of them, are parts of himself as he is part of them.

Bruce's journey resonates with Lynd's conceptualization of shame as he seeks to make sense of the link between spirituality and shame and struggles towards mutual relationship. He did not appear deficient in empathy, blaming of others, bitter or resentful. Rather he presented as a mature, intelligent and thoughtful person struggling to understand and stretch beyond the limitations he experienced in his sexual expression.

The shame and guilt around sex in the Christian community beg the question: Do Christian anthropology and liturgy create chronic, morally disabling shame? How may the Church offer the good news of forgiveness for harmful acts –lifting the burden of guilt and freeing responsive and responsible action– without cultivating shame? Pattison (2000, 229-274) reviews shame in Christian thought and practice and concludes that the same symbols, images, myths and narratives that can help engender or exacerbate chronic shame may also alleviate shame for others. He advocates that the Christian community become sensitised to its use of shame and seek to minimise the possibility that its practices foster disabling shame (*id.*, 276).

The important consideration for this research is that shame and secrecy inhibit the work of poetic sexual phronesis.

10.3 WRESTLING THE ANGEL OF OTHER AS SELF

Christian ethics encourage love of other as self (Matthew 22:34-40). The focus interview for this section is "Shaun", whose adult journey took unexpected turns and required wrestling that enabled identification of another with himself, calling forth the construction of moral sexual phronesis and a theology of sexual expression.

Shaun married in his early thirties and the marriage was very good in the beginning. But things started to deteriorate, with their sexual life becoming a focal point of dissatisfaction:

I was too emotionally and psychologically immature to recognise what was going on in that because the relationship wasn't right, because I was

making my way in the world, and I was providing lots of money...but drinking like a fish at the same time and then coming back and not really connecting emotionally, we weren't communicating very well, so [my wife] began to be less and less sexually responsive, and as she became less sexually responsive, I was sort of hurt and em why's this happening? I'm doing all the things...and I became more sexually demanding, and so it became an issue....

Shaun's wife eventually left the marriage, leaving him devastated:

I had to completely re-evaluate everything in my life, including my relationship with God...

The divorce became the impetus for "deep personal exploration, self-awareness, growing God consciousness" as Shaun engaged spiritual and secular healing modalities that enabled a searching reflexivity. At one point he became involved with a married woman. The relationship took a sexual turn:

...there was immense emotional connection, really profound, and the sex was um phenomenal through the time we were together. And in that way and uh yeah, it was fantastic. It showed me what sex between two people who were really fully engaged with each other could be. It was the total experience, you know, physical, mental, spiritual....and it was wonderful.

I asked how it ended:

I began to um [long silence] I sort of gradually ... this is somebody who's married to somebody else began to... it was the apple in the garden....It was not congruent with my ... spiritual moral framework that I was having an adulterous affair, and I suppose coupled with that...was knowing that her husband was as emotionally and mentally fragile as he was, that knowing [my wife] leaving me nearly killed me...knowing what that had done to me, that because we had this thing, you know, Abelard and Heloise and never mind the rest of the world wasn't ... the grand

scheme of things is bigger than that and you can't just be your own little dyad and ignore the impact that your actions might have on other people.

He reflected further on what he had learnt from the experience:

I suppose it would be fair to say that it was the only mature sexual relationship I've had. It was but boy was it...a full and an amazingly fruitful burgeoning expression of sexuality. So in that sense it showed me, and certainly when I think about it in terms of my ministry, in terms of experiencing the...real wonder of a really full sexual relationship, ...my ministry, my life would be the poorer for not having experienced it in that way to that depth....

...when sex is at its best it's the language of the trinity, it's perichoresis, it's mutual indwelling, it's the complete giving and receiving of just being in and with each other and uh no worries about performance, no worries...just an ultimate form of communication and of being so in that way, it was different and full and rich and I'm very pleased that I've had that experience in my life.

...if God in the nature of what God is is unknowable, in the *mysterium stricte dictum* sense, *mysterium logicum* sense, that is beyond what we know but we can have glimpses, it seems to me He's given us that form of relationship....and mirrored in other ways, parent-child, friendship, all of these different forms of love and of the expression of love allow us to touch the godhead and experience God in different ways. And sexuality is one of those ways...as I say that sexual experience in its fullest sense is I think a sacred reflection of what God is like and what He wants us to be and what He wants us to be to each other.

Shaun's insights are profound. They signal the potential for working with sexual experience in a framework that recognises the link between sexuality and spirituality as the basis for Christian sexual ethics and reflexive moral

formation. They also affirm that sexual expression can be a “lower-case sacrament of the presence of the incomprehensible God” (Lawler & Salzman, 2011, 170). It is important to note that Shaun was able to have a fully mature sexual relationship only after significant reflexive activity: “I couldn’t have done it...with all that fear and false ego stuff, I’d have been too afraid to expose myself totally to another person.” One has to be sufficiently secure in oneself to risk the vulnerability of an intimate sexual relationship. Recall the joint dynamism of identity and relationship.

His journey also reflects Ricoeur’s (1992) understanding of ethics rooted in self-esteem and esteem for others. Christ and Eros embrace in the liminal activity of creating a sexual phronesis that acknowledges the dignity and worth of every person and engages with that reality compassionately. Shaun worked with his self-awareness, emotions and rational faculties to make a sexual-spiritual credo, the result of poetic phronesis, that will guide him in the future.

Each of the interviewees came to know themselves as moral agents as they discovered themselves and their capacity for relationship in sexual encounters, the dynamic joint *telos* of sex driving their development. They made sense of sex and faith as they lived into their own stories, seeking coherence and narrative intelligibility. Susan came to know her own agency and crafted a personal sexual ethic that enabled her to be responsible in relationship.

Maryanne’s long journey of bodily acceptance was accompanied by the grace of a loving husband and the riches of a sacramental church. Genevieve and Robert’s early sexual encounters prepared them for fruitful marriages later on and cultivated a capacity for fidelity. Ruth wrestled the angels and demons in the Christian tradition to discover and integrate her sexuality and her theological perspective, enabling her later to recognise her life partner. George is wrestling the clash of church and secular cultures as he seeks to be faithful to God in his primary relationship, measuring his life experience against traditional church teaching and grieving the Church’s “failure to meet people where they are”. Bruce continues to exercise critical reflectivity and reflexivity as he seeks freedom from the bondage of a shaming Christianity and freedom to

engage in a mutual, loving relationship. The failure of Shaun's first marriage spurred a journey of self- and God-discovery that in time led to the capacity for full sexual self-giving and a decision to end an adulterous affair.

The sexual phronesis of these ordinands was forged in the crucible of personal experience of self and others in conversation with Christian tradition. *Veritas*, the truth of a person's sex, seeks to give birth to virtue. The educational task, then, is to create and resource the liminal space in which sexual phronesis is formed.

PART FOUR: RESOURCING SEXUAL-SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION – FORMING FAITHFULNESS, TEACHING TREASURE

*All who seek you
test you.
And those who find you
bind you to image and gesture.*

*I would rather sense you
as the earth senses you.
In my ripening
ripens
what you are.*

*I need from you no tricks
to prove you exist.
Time, I know,
is other than you.*

*No miracles, please.
Just let your laws
become clearer
from generation to generation.*

Rilke, *The Book of Pilgrimage*, II, 15 (Macy and Barrows, 1996, 115)

Rilke captures poetic phronesis as sensing and testing and ultimately a process of “ripening” which reveals God. Veritas nurtures virtue.

This thesis began with an invitation into the borderlands, liminal space where new understandings come to light. It is in liminal space that sexual phronesis is created – in the story of self, sex and God that is made and remade over time. We are *homo poeta* (Farley, 1990, 102 quoting Becker). Whether processing sexual development, coping with confusing or hurtful sexual encounters, wrestling the complexities of divorce or adultery, or grappling with sex-negativity in Christian tradition, the interviewees crafted a moral interpretation that guided them into their future sexual expression. Diverse Christianities functioned as stumbling blocks, guideposts and supports as they made the journey through the borderlands of poetic phronesis.

Ordinands come into training with diverse sexual and faith experiences, though few may have reflected on their personal sexual knowledge. The task for ministerial training is four-fold, geared to resourcing the liminal space of sexual poetic phronesis:

- To provide the opportunity to wrestle scripture and tradition critically and constructively in conversation with personal and other knowledge;
- To invite reflection on personal sexual knowledge in order to consolidate learning, identify vulnerabilities, and enable ease in addressing sexual matters pastorally;
- To cultivate a habit of reflexivity that will enable self-awareness and perpetual self-correction in sexual decision-making; and
- To provide specialist information about the ministerial role and managing sexual dynamics, and to seek to enable their integration.

An andragogy for sexual-spiritual integration creates, resources and invites people into liminal space where they may wrestle all four sources of theology and begin to take on the mantle of leadership with self-awareness and sensitivity to the power and vulnerability of the role. Sexual reflexivity is key to the endeavour.

Yet many are the barriers to sexual reflexivity in the Church: a deep ethos of suspicion of the body and of sex, the shame and secrecy of “don’t ask, don’t tell”, and a “behavioural world”, in Schön’s (1995, 303) words, that suppresses dilemmas and holds close the exercise of mastery and mystery. Strong institutional and personal barriers impede sexual-spiritual reflexivity (Grosch-Miller, 2009).

Inviting sexual reflexivity, however, is essential to resourcing sexual poetic phronesis. As discussed earlier, adult learning theory posits that learning begins with and engages personal experience (see also MacKeracher, 2012, 349-353; Cranton and Taylor, 2012, 14). I argue in my literature review (2008a, 7-9, 15-22) that transformative learning theory contributes significantly to theological education as it seeks to foster learning that changes a person’s attitudes and actions from the inside out. That theory has continued to develop and, in the thirty years since its inception, transformative learning has become the “new andragogy”, dominating the discourse on adult education (Cranton and Taylor, 2012, 16). Critical reflectivity and reflexivity are central in this theory.

In the following chapters I discuss formation and integration in theological education before exploring the aid of transformative learning theory in fostering reflexivity and integration. Finally I will propose elements of an andragogy for sexual-spiritual integration.

CHAPTER 11: FORMATION VS. INTEGRATION

In recent decades formation has become an increasing concern in theological education (Astley et al., 1996; Bass and Dykstra, 2008; Foster et al., 2006; Mudge and Poling, 1987). In the post-Christian West many ordinands come into training without having been formed in a Christian community, intensifying the need for intentional andragogies (Lindbeck, 1996, 288-290).

In my literature review (2008a, 27-30) I examined the concept of formation in English ministerial training in light of Kelsey's (1993, 9-12) concepts of excellence in education conceived as deriving from Athens (culturing virtue) or Berlin (stressing critical research and professional education). I reviewed ministerial training documents, concluding that they revealed an overarching orientation towards Athens with Berlin understandings incorporated. I then critiqued formation by osmosis, implicit in Athens notions, and argued for an intentional formation andragogy (2008a, 36-38).

Formation as an educational goal is tricky business. The word itself is problematic (Foster et al., 2006, 125-126, n.1). Is the educator seeking to *conform* the student to the tradition or is she hoping to invite *transformation*? "Integration" is a better word for what is sought: consistency of thought, word and deed. Cahalan (2012, 386) defines integration as referring to

the vocation and processes of student learning in which being, doing, and knowing intersect; the elements of teaching, including pedagogy and curriculum and the school's culture; and the goal of prudent and wise practice within the profession of ministry that exists for the sake of leading communities of faith.

Cahalan (*id.*, 387) reports a paucity of scholarship on integration in theological education despite its emergence as "the pressing problem of the day".

The concern for integration is embedded in Farley's (2001, 152-157, 165) advocacy for the recovery of *theologia*, theological education that cultures virtue by the *habitus* of faith, and in virtue ethics (MacIntyre, 2007; Murphy et

al., 1997) which allows that human virtues are “learned qualities that assist us in achieving the human *telos*” through narrative engagement (Kallenberg, 1997, 22, 28). Tracy (1996) asks “Can virtue be taught?” and answers “yes”, advocating an understanding of theological education as soul training and students as “subjects-in-process”. Reflection which facilitates critical cognitive engagement is key in both Farley’s and Tracy’s conceptions. I argue for the cultivation of reflexivity as well, which works with personal experience, self-awareness and emotion.

Wheeler (1999, 113), considering the sexual “formation” of clergy, highlights the need for “much more serious attention to the task of moral formation for ministry”. She (*id.*, 103) makes the case for intentional sexual formation, acknowledging that

sexuality is grounded so deeply in who we are, rooted in our most basic needs, and entwined in all of our experiences of care and well-being, we cannot begin with rules for sexual conduct, nor can we finish by developing procedures for adjudicating charges of sexual abuse by clergy.

She argues that virtue ethics can give us “a language for and a description of those central features of character we need” and an “understanding of the integral relation between character and action” (*id.*, 102-103). She concludes that practice is central to developing virtue and that “the practices that sustain virtuous sexual life are simply the disciplines that nurture holiness...the regular practice of prayer...[and] stable and trustworthy contexts for accountability” (*id.*, 103, 112). Wheeler does not advocate enabling ordinands to reflect on their personal sexual experience to facilitate integration. She is not alone in shying away from providing opportunities for ordinands to reflect on their experience; as discussed in Chapter 6, few American seminaries provide such opportunities (Ott, 2009, 34).

Prayer and accountability will not suffice for sexual-spiritual integration (*cf.* Friberg and Laaser, 1998, 103). What is also required is an andragogy that

enables reflexive engagement with personal sexual experience and critical reflectivity on all four sources of theology. Transformative learning theory, which highlights reflectivity and reflexivity, aids our understanding of how reflexivity enables integration.

CHAPTER 12: REFLEXIVITY IN POETIC PHRONESIS

I want to know my own will

and to move with it.

And I want, in the hushed moments

when the nameless draws near,

to be among the wise ones –

....

I want to unfold.

Let no place in me hold itself closed,

for where I am closed, I am false.

I want to stay clear in your sight.

I would describe myself

like a landscape I've studied

at length, in detail;

like a word I'm coming to understand;

like a pitcher I pour from at mealtime;

like my mother's face;

like a ship that carried me

when the waters raged.

Rilke, *The Book of Monastic Life*, I, 13 (Macy and Barrows, 1996, 59-60)

Self-knowledge and self-awareness (Rilke's knowing "my own will", "studied at length, in detail...a word I'm coming to understand") is the goal of the habit of reflexivity that is central in the poetic phronesis that is sexual-spiritual integration.

Transformative learning theory contributes to our understanding of poetic phronesis by emphasising the role of experience, reflection and reflexivity in

adult learning that integrates belief and action. As the theory has developed it has expanded from being primarily a cognitive theory to a theory-in-process that recognises extrarational ways of knowing and seeks integrative and holistic ends (Cranton and Taylor, 2012, 12). A particularly helpful development is Kasl and Yorks' (2012) application of Heron's (1992) theory of personhood to provide an epistemological frame for understanding transformative change. Implicit in Kasl and York's appropriation of Heron's epistemology is the exercise of reflexivity, the "self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing" which Heron calls "critical subjectivity" (Heron and Reason, 2008, 282).

For Heron, knowledge begins with lived experience, "the ground of our being and knowing" (Heron and Reason, 1997, 276). He connects the structures and dynamics of the mind with four ways of knowing that are imaged in pyramid form (*Figure 4*): from *experiential* to *presentational*, *propositional* and *practical* (Heron and Reason, 1997, 280-281).

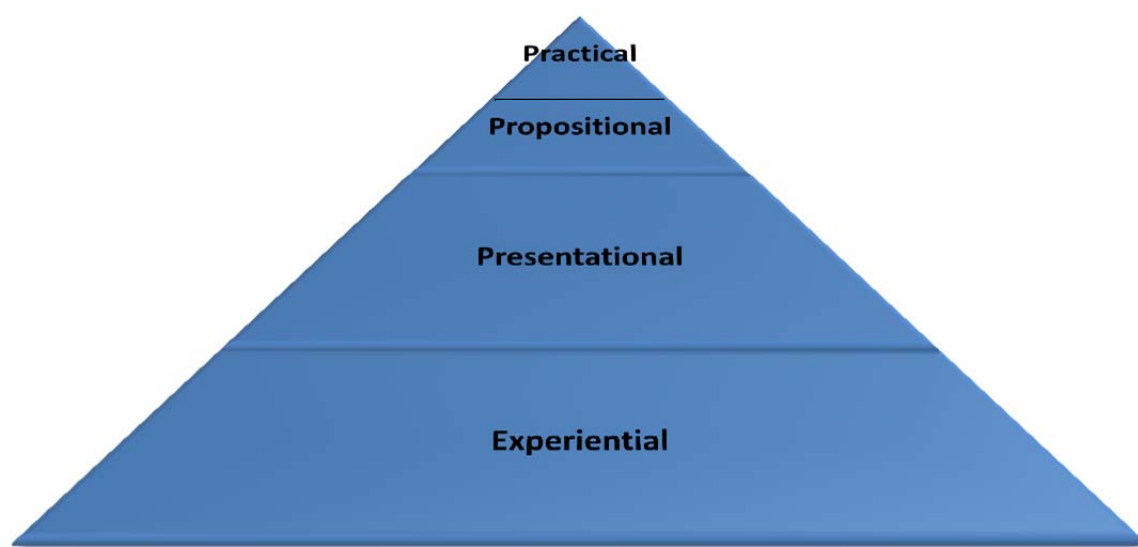


Figure 4: Heron's Ways of Knowing

Experience is the base of all knowing, “prelinguistic, tacit and often subconscious...the location of emotions, empathy and felt resonance...” (Kasl and Yorks, 2012, 508). Sexual knowing is experiential, involving the affective domain (cf. Tisdell, 2012, 25). The second way of knowing, *presentational*, is where significant patterns in lived experience are intuitively grasped (Kasl and Yorks, 2012, 509). This way of knowing correlates to the storymaking capacity described in Part Two by Damasio and Ricoeur. The third way of knowing, *propositional*, is “the traditional realm for educational practice” (*id.*) where concepts are developed, evidence is marshalled and logic exercised. Finally *practical* knowing manifests the ability to exercise a skill or behaviour (Kasl and Yorks, 2012, 508-509). It is presentational knowing that bridges experiential and propositional knowing, preparing the way for practical knowing.

According to Heron a person’s knowing is valid when there is coherence between all four ways of knowing and action reflects belief. Coherence, i.e., integration, happens by way of reflexivity/critical subjectivity, which is

an awareness of the four ways of knowing, of how they are currently interacting, and of ways of changing the relations between them so that they articulate a reality that is unclouded by a restrictive and ill-disciplined subjectivity (Heron and Reason, 1997, 280).

When one’s practice does not match one’s beliefs, this signals the need for reflexivity (Kasl & Yorks, 2012, 509) – that the story of oneself may be remade and poetic phronesis engendered. Ministerial training is an important venue for this kind of learning: Chopp (1995, 40-44) recognises the links between reflexivity, narrativity and the creation of self in theological education.

Heron’s epistemology supports the thrust of my research in the necessity of engaging personal experience and inviting reflexivity to accomplish integration. Given the institutional and personal barriers that block sexual reflexivity, how may reflexivity be invited and resourced? Two aspects of working reflexively are especially important: First, how personal sexual knowledge can be engaged

given its tacit, subjugated nature; and second, how the ethos of institution and classroom can invite or inhibit reflexivity.

LIBERATING TACIT, SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGE

A story

My parents live on the edge of a forest in the Great North Woods of Wisconsin. Very early every morning –rain, snow or dew-kissed– my mother rises from her warm bed and plods to the kitchen where she pulls boots over her feet and dons outerwear appropriate to the season. She opens the door from the kitchen to the garage, and there scoops dried corn into a large white bucket, topping it with yesterday's bread and salted peanuts in the shell which have been hidden from inquisitive chipmunks in a cupboard above the corn bin.

If you stand at the dining room window and look out onto the back garden while she is performing these preparatory tasks, you will see a dozen or so deer lingering at the edge of the garden, heads down yet alert, looking at the house from the corners of their eyes, poised to dart back but hopeful for a reason to come forward once the gift has been spilled on the ground and the giver has returned to the house.

My mother has been performing this labour of love for years. She takes attendance from the corner of her eye and worries when a particular patron fails to appear (especially during hunting season). She names her favourites –Snowflake has a distinctive mark on her face– and watches for impending births. As time goes by, the deer become bolder. Now they stand, watchfully, within a meter of her pouring hands, bounding off only if she moves too quickly. She measures her actions.

Grosch-Miller, 2012

Palmer (2000, 7-8) imagines the soul as a wild animal, easily startled and quick to flee from a direct approach. It needs the freedom to choose to reveal itself. It needs space, silence and safety.

Bounding sacred space

Autobiographical memory is dependent upon the environment (Damasio, 2000, 229). Therefore the environment is vital in seeking to enable the wild deer to reveal itself. An environment in which sexual reflexivity is invited must engender safety, trust and care.

Here Christian tradition offers helpful tools: framing teaching with a morning psalm, scripture and prayer; inviting silence, prayer and song throughout; and ending with a benediction enables a class to feel held in the tradition and in the hands of God. Foster et al (2006, 102-110) would identify these rituals as “practicing the presence of God”, an andragogical strategy that contributes to the formation of pastoral imagination. They found “the transparency of the teacher’s commitment” to practicing the presence of God as one of the most formative influences on ordinands. Teacher commitments that facilitate sacred space for sexual reflexivity include: to God and the integrity and dynamism of Christian tradition, to the sanctity and dignity of the individual, to the creation of space for honest and searching conversation among people with diverse viewpoints, and to affirm the blessing and vulnerability of human sexual being.

Such commitments are facilitated by the group creation of an etiquette that bounds the space as sacred, liminal, learning space that protects the sanctity of the individual, her freedom and her dignity, that the wild deer might show itself and engage with others. Etiquettes that facilitate sexual reflexivity include confidentiality, respectful listening, suspending judgment, the right not to have to share, and the intention to work in diverse small groups. Once the etiquette is written, asking each individual to indicate their willingness to participate in accordance with it reinforces its power. The etiquette may be revisited to be improved and remembered.

No learning space is safe; challenge and conflict are part of the learning process just as tension and tragedy are inherent in poetic phronesis. Moreover the fact that homosexual expression is condemned in the tradition means that it is impossible to provide a space in which that will not be expressed, which may be

hurtful to some. What is important is the effort to make the space safe enough to enable willing participation (Conklin, 1997, 157), normalising difference and acknowledging it as both reality and strength in the Christian tradition.

The bounding of sacred space is about creating trust – trust that the vulnerable ‘I’ will not be annihilated; trust that the teacher can handle the topic; trust that God is present and accounted for. The importance of the creation of trust within the ecclesial ethos of shame and secrecy cannot be overemphasised.

SHAPING ETHOS

The power of ethos, which is the power of culture and community, came home to me when I taught a short course in an institution where months before students had been expelled for sexual misconduct. After looking at how the Bible and tradition treat sex, the interactive and myriad influences on sex, and the link between sexuality and spirituality, I asked the students to reimagine a Christian sexual ethic for twenty-first century Britain. The results were startlingly unlike those of any class I have taught before or since. Students were unable to do more than parrot the party line: celibacy before marriage and fidelity in marriage. Usually when I ask students to do this their creations are holistic and person-centred, including such attributes as self-knowledge, self-giving, mutuality, and committed love (cf. Conklin, 1997, 171). When I asked if anyone could imagine sexual expression being acceptable outside of marriage, one student hesitantly raised a hand and articulated an ethic more consonant with what I was accustomed to hearing and consistent with the moral creativity exercised by my interviewees. I later asked about her experience. She reported that after the class, no one spoke to her. She felt isolated and ostracised.

Fear is a powerful impediment to making sense of sex and faith, as are shame and secrecy (Friberg and Laaser, 1998, 94-95). It is the reason ordinands and other Christians compartmentalise their sexual lives from their spiritual lives (*id.*, 98-99), in the process impeding the poetic phronetic process of integration. How the Church or a training institution handles sexual misconduct can exacerbate fear or allay it.

The current state of the Church in regard to sex can be described as one of crisis, with all the danger and opportunity therein. Heated discussions about homosexuality are peppered with threats of division in many denominations. Scandals involving the sexual misdeeds of ordained ministers titillate the public and demoralise churchgoers. The danger is that these events lock the Church into more fear, shame and secrecy. The opportunity is that through the crises we may learn more about ourselves and God, developing a theology of “the body’s grace” which “does justice to the experience of concrete sexual discovery, in all its pain and variety” (Williams, 2002a, 320).

What can a training institution do to create an ethos that can facilitate andragogies of sexual-spiritual integration? The answer will be different in each institution, given its staff and capacity for openness. But the more that fear, shame and secrecy can be minimised by the modelling of ease and normalization of sexual discourse, the better. The ethos of the institution and of the classroom significantly shape what can be taught and what will be learned (Miller-McLemore, 2008).

Alongside bounding sacred space for reflexivity and conversation, and normalising both difference and discourse about sex, another strategy for creating an ethos that invites reflexivity is laughter.

The lubricant of laughter

Laughter works wonders: hearty guffaws, embarrassed giggles, sly snickering. Despite my normally dull wit I find that I and others in the classroom quickly recognise the ridiculous and the naughty and exploit them for laughs (see also Conklin, 1997, 167). Zerubavel (2006, 74) notes that breaking silence generally generates deep resentment *unless* the silence is widely acknowledged to be problematic or when silence is broken playfully. Why does laughter work?

Laughter, like sex, is embodied and may facilitate liminality. Isherwood and Stuart (1998, 140, 145-146) note the connection between laughter and sex made in the cultures cradling early Christianity: “Laughter... was one of the

ways in which the human body reflected and partook in the cosmological process of creation and recreation.”

Laughter too -like silence, metaphor and sex- is ambiguous. We laugh at people we think are below us (the superiority theory). We laugh to unleash tension (the relief theory). We laugh when things are incongruous (the incongruity theory) (Gilhus in Isherwood and Stuart, 1998, 140). And we laugh with those with whom we wish to stay close (I christen this “the bonding theory”); here laughter expresses good will and a desire to belong. “When you laugh,” says Turgenev, “you forgive and are ready to love” (Lynd, 1958, 147).

The relief theory is surely in play in discussing sex in a Church-related setting. Gilhus (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998, 140) allows that laughter acts as a safety valve, relieving the psychological pressure of keeping something a taboo. He suggests that this supports the status quo. I suggest that it also enables subversion, breaching silence and enabling deconstruction.

I also believe that laughter plays an important role in bonding. We know we are treading on dangerous, holy ground. We are in this together even if sometimes we wish we were not, so painful is our disagreement. Laughing together embodies and strengthens our relationships to one another and to the great things we are considering: sex and God and the Body of Christ.

Having created a space that invites reflexivity and conversation through bounding sacred space, normalising difference and discourse, and being willing to laugh, what andragogies of integration resource sexual poetic phronesis?

CHAPTER 13: ANDRAGOGIES OF INTEGRATION

Gorringer (2001, 92-93) speaks of Christianity as an “education of desire”, not denying the body but “channelling its energies creatively”. How may we educate sexual desire, resourcing people in their poetic phronesis to enable flourishing and faithfulness in sexual expression?

We need a pedagogy, ways of gradually opening people’s eyes to the beauty and dignity of the human body and its grace. Learning to live our chastity well is not primarily a question of the will, bottling up our wildest passions, but of a way of life that sustains us in the truth of what and who we are (Radcliffe, 2005, 104).

Foster et al (2006, 100) conceive of andragogies of “formation” as those that cultivate “participation in the creative activity of God”, nurturing the embodiment of religious knowledge and the authenticity and integrity of faith. They note the challenge of forming “the religious identity and vocation, the spiritual dispositions and habits” of ordinands, given the diversity and strength of their prior formation in nonreligious culture and the necessity to enable growing out of “naïve, pre-critical, sentimental or quasi-fundamentalist piety” towards a deep grounding that is also open (*id.*, 101). They do not attend to sexual-spiritual integration, but their research into formative andragogies is nonetheless helpful. First and foremost, they do not assume that formation occurs by osmosis. They discuss three approaches that can inform any andragogy for formation: practicing the presence of God (*supra*, p. 145), practicing holiness, and practicing religious leadership (Foster et al., 2006, 103-125).

In their discussion of practicing holiness, Foster et al (*id.*, 110-116) hold up the power of respect and vulnerability in the class room and emphasise the character of the *habitus* of ministerial leadership. The integrity of the teacher sets the tone: her congruence, how she treats herself and others, how she speaks and what she says, all matter (*id.*, 113). They note Palmer’s (2007, 10)

premise: “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (see also Conklin, 1997, 167).

An andragogy for sexual-spiritual integration practices holiness not only through the identity and integrity of the teacher, but also by engaging “the grace of great things” – examining the fullness of theological sources and exploring the potential sacramentality of sexual expression.

“THE GRACE OF GREAT THINGS”

Palmer (2007, 110-111) uses the phrase “the grace of great things” to describe the subject around which a community of learners gathers. It is the things themselves Parker seeks to capture, not just the texts, theories and disciplines that surround the things. Palmer (*id.*) says that great things in all their complexity have a grace when we rise to meet them in all their manifold mystery, welcoming diversity, ambiguity, the crucible of conflict, honesty, humility and freedom. What diminishes them is absolutism and relativism: the claim that we know it all and the conviction that we cannot know anything with certainty beyond our meagre viewpoint (*id.*, 112). The grace of great things invites critical reflectivity and reflexivity in conversation.

The great things of Christian scripture and tradition are fruitfully engaged by enabling ordinands to know what the Bible and tradition say about sex, to critically reflect on their original context, and to chart the development of the tradition. This is the work Ricoeur (1991a, 96) would describe as appropriation that enables the revelatory power of the text, an important component of sexual poetic phronesis.

When I teach, after facilitating the creation of safe space, I begin with the Bible and tradition. I give the class a list of all sex-related passages in scripture and break it into small groups to read and consider the underlying assumptions about gender and sex in a particular category of texts (creation and family stories; the rules; the blessings; the horrors; the apostolic writings). I have found that inviting personal attention to the texts is more effective in resourcing critical reflectivity than lecturing. As the small groups report what they have

found, I intersperse their comments with information about the ancient near eastern context. I draw their attention to the texts' concern for procreation, property and "purity" (in the Levitical holiness codes) and query whether those are sufficient foundations for thinking theologically about sex in our place and time. Christian tradition is engaged by a *Who said that?* game that traces the tradition's development from an anti-body, anti-female dualism towards a more holistic ethic that embraces sexual expression as a good in marriage beyond procreation and the potential sacramentality of sexual expression. In this way the sex negativity of Christian tradition is uncovered and it is demonstrated that tradition is dynamic.

After engaging scripture and tradition, students are invited to engage in reason and experience first by considering the contributions of social and biological sciences to the human understanding of sexuality and later by spending time alone working with their personal sexual experience, which work is never shared. After all four sources of theology have been explored, and their value and challenges discussed, I ask the class to formulate foundational principles for thinking theologically about sex.

I teach this way to facilitate informed and critical reflectivity and reflexivity. When I conducted a pilot focus group in the aftermath of a course, I discovered that the ordinands were wrestling all of the sources of theology. In so doing they measured themselves against the traditional no sex except in heterosexual marriage rule, making implicit value judgments: some holding firmly to the tradition, others tentatively seeking to wrestle out what one group member called a "faithfully realistic" ethic because of personal experience.

One man came into the course not knowing what to think about homosexuality. In a reflective exercise written before the course, he wrote of his confusion:

Where scripture does give guidance, it seems fairly directive on particular bodily acts. How do I square my respect for 2000 years of tradition, and my conviction that bodily acts matter in some way, with what seems a deep pull in me towards a very liberal view of sexuality?...I

still just do not feel able to come to definitive opinions about many sexual issues.

The focus group met a few days after the course. Near the end of the hour, the same man offered this contribution to the discussion:

I've had quite traditional views on homosexuality and discovered last year that I've got a nephew...and he's gay.....thinking about those things.....the nature of the sexual act itself does not seem to me, the God-honouring part is the spiritual part, the intent, the emotion, the honouring, the relationship – not the act itself....I mean that's been a huge shift for me ... in some ways it's a lot less comfortable position but I think *I've fallen down* into that position, yes, that I think um yeah I mean I think that's where I am now on the issue of gay relationships within the Church (emphasis added).

"I've fallen down", not "here I stand". His language reflected the weight of scripture and tradition that his personal experience had opened the door to questioning.

A woman with adult children also couched her opinions so as to recognise that she was taking a minority view:

I can't say I'm going to get hot under the collar if [my adult children] have sex with someone. I really can't. *That may sound terrible* but for me the most important thing is that they understand and they value people and their relationships and they grow in strong relationships (emphasis added).

When we talk about sex in Church, the traditional view sits in the centre carved in stone. Personal experience may spur a person to treat that stone as a Rosetta, feeling its contours and measuring them against what is known body and soul. For others, the stone has come down from Mount Sinai and there is not a lot more to be said. No one ignores the stone. And so should it be, for sacred learning space is capacious enough to hold scripture, tradition, reason

and experience in the poesis of sexual phronesis. Such is “the grace of great things”.

The great thing of sex and God is further engaged by critical reflexivity on personal experience and face to face conversation with diverse others.

THE POESIS OF WISDOM: LIMINAL CONVERSATIONS

The tacit nature of personal sexual knowledge, the attendant difficulty in accessing it and the challenge of interpreting experience were discussed earlier. In my reflective practice piece (2009, 22-28) I describe how a creative writing exercise enabled me to embrace sexual reflexivity. The efficacy of oblique, autobiographical methods and their potential for sexual-spiritual integration is explained by Heron’s pyramidal epistemology. Kasl and Yorks (2012, 510) posit presentational knowing as an imaginal space which

provides a bridging pathway that facilitates coherence [integration] between our lived experience and our thoughts and actions. It can also signal incoherence – thus the need for contemplation, critical subjectivity [reflexivity], and critical reflection.

They observe that expressive techniques such as art-making and creative writing bring feeling and emotion into consciousness, promote self-awareness and codify experience (*id.*, 512), enabling a conversation with the self. This is evidenced in the poetry and art made by Susan, Maryanne and Ruth and in my sexual autoethnography which worked an unexpected integration in my spirituality.

Kasl and Yorks are describing the creative and integrative potential of liminal space. Hunt and Sampson (2006, 69-70) link the process of creative writing to rediscovering the childhood capacity for spontaneous play that enables us to become a “self-in-process”. “Lost in play” (recall Winnicott), the wild deer comes out to drink and discover, cavort and create. There is an unselfconsciousness that enables this, a loss of self that is also an embrace of self, a deep connection and a distancing that enable reflexivity (Hunt &

Sampson, 2006, 1-4). All that was written in Part One about liminality, play and poetry applies to oblique methods. Lynd (1958, 250) declares: "Only a language of symbol, of paradox, of abundant meaning can communicate the deeper and more elusive ranges of human experience." The process of creating facilitates learning that integrates being (Hoggan et al., 2009, 2). In my teaching, I use the following oblique methods to invite sexual reflexivity: word association; "apps" figures that work as portals to self-knowledge; the sketching out of life-lines identifying sexual and spiritual events; timed free-writing; invitations to write poetry or prose.

Engagement with personal sexual experience, however, is not enough. For one's experience is just that, one's singular and limited experience. The culturing of virtue, Tracy (1996, 376-377) argues, requires face to face conversation with others which reveals "the state of the soul" and enables the subject-in-process of education. Tracy characterises dialectical enquiry (conversation) as "driven by the power of eros that manifests the soul's participation in the divine and in the whole" (*id.*, 383). Chopp (1995, 43-44) also notes the importance in theological education of conditions of possibility for dialogue – to listen and to speak, to hear and to be heard. She (*id.*, 108) acknowledges that such conversation "entails risk, an engagement that we will be changed, and thus...transformation" (see also Conklin, 1997, 167). And Yorks and Kasl (2002, 185-187) advocate "learning-within-relationship" that opens individuals to the experience of diverse others, eliciting reflexivity. So it is that through conversation about the grace of great things in bounded sacred space, individuals are enabled to further their own sexual poetic phronesis: appropriating Christian texts, unearthing and consolidating personal sexual knowing, and extending their knowledge in conversation with diverse others.

A particular teaching event underscored the power of vulnerable and respectful conversation –practicing holiness (Foster, 2006, 110-116)– to facilitate sexual phronesis:

It was the beginning of the second day. I hadn't slept well. The first day had ended with a strong statement by a participant that sex belonged only in marriage, God-ordained between one man and one woman. No one had risen to articulate a different view. A heavy silence hung over the class as we disbanded.

I had laboured to make the space safe and open. The participants held diverse theological viewpoints; I had hoped that we could teach each other as we explored this sensitive topic. As I tossed and turned that night, I wondered how, in my striving to make the space safe for all, I had empowered primarily those who kept to the party line.

At breakfast "Michael" approached me. "I'm really angry about how the class ended yesterday. I've been angry all night. I felt like I was being told that I was not a Christian," he said. "Can you say more?," I asked. He then told me his story: the story of a young man active in church struggling with his sexuality who, when he had his first sexual experience with another man, was full of self-loathing. Michael became strident in his opposition to homosexuality, until he couldn't bear the dissonance between what his heart knew and what his tradition taught. He went to his pastor and confessed his struggle. The pastor promptly removed him from all church responsibilities. Michael left and continued to wrestle issues of sex and faith. He came to accept his sexuality and discovered a renewed and deepened faith that in time blossomed into a vocation for ministry. I asked him if he would be willing simply to tell his story at the start of the day's class. He said "Yes."

I began the class (after psalm and prayer) with a statement that at the conclusion of class the previous day, we had heard a strong articulation of a scriptural and traditional view of the place of sex in human life and asked if there were any other viewpoints, perhaps drawing on other sources of theology. Michael raised his hand and told his story.

The impact of the story was to transform the space, opening and warming it. Some thanked him for his courage. People who held the heterosexual marriage only viewpoint acknowledged that, while their opinions were strong, there was a

need for pastoral sensitivity when dealing with this subject. (Indeed, the two most vocal protagonists of that view approached Michael during the tea break to speak with him.) The remainder of the course was marked by great sensitivity, which enabled others later to speak openly about struggles with internet pornography.

Michael later described the experience of the first day as extremely painful, triggering all the hurtful, destructive, unloving things he had heard as a young man. He knew he either had to live with the anger and survive the rest of the course or say something. He would have wanted to say something judgmental and angry, engaging with the issue theologically, but with my encouragement decided he would just tell his story. He couldn't have done that on day one because "it would have felt like I was playing the victim, changing the discourse to a different, emotional level which didn't seem fair". But that second morning, he felt he could offer it in the structure of a conversation about the sources of theology.

When he opened his mouth to speak to the group, he thought "Oh my God, what am I about to do?" He knew that people would see him in a different light forever after. But once he began, the atmosphere in the room changed. He got visual clues of support around the room: thumbs up, smiles, tears. He immediately felt relief – having said all that was on his heart, not repressing or bottling anger. The man next to him, who was theologically more traditional, put his arm around him when he finished.

"The best thing", Michael said, "was the spirit of generosity, openness and honesty –real listening to each other– treating each other as sisters and brothers, once we got over the hurdles of fear, doubt and hurt.... 'Listening each other into speech'²⁶ summed up the whole experience of the course.....the Holy Spirit was definitely there."

Grosch-Miller 2011

²⁶ I had titled one of the sessions "hearing each other into speech", a feminist strategy (Morton, 2001, 178 n.1, 209-210).

Michael's sharing of his experience opened up the space for genuine dialogue, stimulating reflection and conversation that impacted ministerial sexual phronesis. Yet my conversation with Michael put the fear of God into me as I heard expressed the pain invoked by the way I had structured the class. It enabled a grace, but a costly one. I later changed the course slightly, being more upfront about the potential for pain because of where the Church is and trying even harder to normalise the fact of difference, styling the course as an opportunity to talk about a sensitive and controversial topic in a searching and respectful way. I now include a session enabling people to tease out the value and challenge of all four sources of theology before we identify theological foundations for thinking about sex.

ASSUMING THE MANTLE

The driving concern in ministerial training is that the ordinand be equipped for the role of Christian leadership which has unique challenges when it comes to sex. In recent decades the sexual power and vulnerability inherent in the ministerial role have come to be better understood (Rutter, 1989; Fortune, 1989; Gula, 1996; CTBI, 2002; Lebacqz and Barton, 1991; Friberg and Laaser, 1998; Litchfield, 2006). The Faith Trust Institute has created training materials that address issues of boundaries, power dynamics and the complexity of human interaction (transference and counter-transference) in ministry settings in order to facilitate sexual formation for church leadership (Poling, 2003). The materials incorporate integrative methods: expressive and conversational techniques that encourage ordinands to imagine themselves into future ministerial roles.

My research suggests that the task of equipping leadership is furthered by emphasising the normalcy, goodness and vulnerability of sexual being and the importance of self-awareness, reflexivity and self-care. A habit of reflexivity can enable ministers to identify personal vulnerability (e.g., disruptions in identity/agency or relationships) and situational triggers that require careful thought and action, spurring them to seek outside advice and support when needed. Reflexivity enables awareness of the drivers of sexual attraction and

expression: “I am” (acceptable, desirable, powerful, Person-Gift) and “I can” (get what I want; harm or help another; love and be loved) may drive sexual expression that is destructive or constructive, unfaithful or faithful. Likewise the drive towards relationship, the second *telos* of sex, may fuel good and bad sexual expression. Reflexivity enables discernment.

Ministerial sexual transgression is surprisingly prevalent and potentially very damaging (Grosch-Miller, 2008, 2-4). As part of fostering sexual phronesis ordinands should be informed about the prevalence, aetiology and impact of ministerial sexual misconduct and awakened to the ever present possibility of self-deception in assessing situations, particularly in the face of strong emotion or need. Codes of conduct and systems of accountability can aid the process of poetic phronesis by providing a reality check on personal sense-making.

My treatment of sex in this thesis has emphasised the constructive possibilities in poetic phronesis. I chose to remove the Augustinian lens of sexual desire tending toward evil in order to understand how sex actually works in human development and faith appropriation. Andragogies of integration, likewise, will be most successful when they lift the veil of shame and enable honest wrestling with all four sources of theology in a safe and respectful environment.

CONCLUSION

My research journey through the borderlands of sex and faith has been marked by discovery and surprise. I expected that I would learn something about sex and faith sense-making by exploring lived experience, but did not expect to propose a theory of the phenomenology of integration. I expected that what I would learn might challenge the sex-negativity in Christian tradition, but did not expect to develop a method and model of practical theology that would enable critical-liminal conversation between experience and the other sources of theology to further develop the tradition. I expected that I would be writing, but not that I would be writing poetry or that the writing would be so personally impactful and revelatory.

The research began with a problem: ministerial sexual misconduct. After theologically reflecting on the practice, shortcomings and challenges of theological education for sexual formation in my literature review (2008), I determined to focus on the lived experience of sex and faith in an effort to understand how better to equip ordinands for faithful sexual living. The key that unlocked my personal sexual knowing and ultimately my research discoveries was an oblique technique: a creative writing exercise.

Before engaging lived experience, I needed to understand what experience is and to think about how it may be utilised in the re-making of theology. I did not know that this was a poetic and phronetic process until I collected the data of lived experience and began to formulate a theory of how sense-making happens. In the end I came to see that an individual's poetic phronesis is a microcosm of the macro-story of how the tradition may develop through critical-liminal conversation with lived experience validated by its fruits.

My examination of lived experience revealed the *veritas* that identity, moral agency and the capacity for relationship are evoked and engendered in sex. The true north compass point that guided the development of the sex of the interviewees was a joint and dynamic *telos* of identity and relationality. Sexual desire and expression assisted them to come to know themselves, to learn to

engage others fruitfully, and, for some, to glimpse the Divine at work in the flesh. The borderland of shared sexual expression was a liminal space in which self was formed, sexual practical wisdom (*phronesis*) was fomented, and theology was compartmentalised, challenged or constructed. This is a moral, creative and poetic activity (in the Greek *poesis* “a making”), the capability for which is inherent in how people make sense of their lives by storytelling. The stories told by interviewees showed that the Church both hindered and helped the process of sexual poetic phronesis. A culture of shame, secrecy and “don’t ask, don’t tell” inhibited full wrestling in liminal space while also making room for some people to bump along as best they could. The stories also reveal that while some ordinands cling to traditional Church teaching that limits sexual expression to heterosexual marriage, others are crafting a new “faithfully realistic” ethic. The sexual ethics of all of the interviewees were forged in the liminal activity of grappling with personal experience, scripture, tradition and reason.

In summary, my thesis proposes a phenomenology of sexual formation: sexual-spiritual integration occurs as individuals create a personal Christian sexual ethic in the wrestling of experience, Christian scripture and tradition, and other sources of knowledge. Given this phenomenology, the educator’s task is to create and resource the liminal space in which poetic phronesis may be fostered. Transformative learning theory, with its attendance to critical reflectivity and reflexivity, provides theoretical underpinning. I conclude that an andragogy of sexual-spiritual integration will enable ordinands to engage the grace of the great thing of sex and God by attending to ethos, bounding sacred liminal space, inviting critical reflectivity and reflexivity, and encouraging vulnerable, respectful conversation. Oblique, autobiographical methods assist sexual-spiritual integration, bridging being, knowing and doing.

The thesis became an exercise in poetic practical theology as I sought to reflect its content through its form – creating liminal space and evoking personal reflection by the use of poetry and story. Poetic practical theology creates liminal space in which the fullness of human experience may be explored and

meaning made from the complex, messy, tragic and beautiful in a life – enabling *veritas* to give birth to virtue. The dignity of the person and the moral creativity inherent in how a person appropriates a tradition is recognised in practical theology that is poetic. The poesis engaged in by individuals may resource a poesis re-making theology through critical and liminal engagement with validated lived experience.

The contributions of this research, then, are to knowledge about the role of sex in human life, the process of sexual–spiritual integration, how integration may be fostered in education, and how a poetic practical theology may enable experience to be brought into conversation with the other sources of theology to enrich the tradition.

Eliot (2001, 20) concludes *East Coker* with these words: “In my end is my beginning.” It is my hope that this research may now fuel further thought, bringing the lived experience of sex into critical-liminal conversation with Christian doctrine, lifting shame and secrecy and writing a new story for the human sexual person in God through poetic practical theology.

BENEDICTION

Life is messy. Rilke, the great poet of becoming, wrote: *...we want to ripen, and for that we open ourselves to darkness and travail* (Macy and Barrows, 2009, 106).

The Gospels strike me as tragic, and death and resurrection the template for real life, the way that love is truly learnt. The cross is tensional: Christian life lived out in the centre of it, with eyes wide open, bearing the pain of stretching to hold the whole world, pleading with heaven and rooted in the earth.

My faith needs to make intellectual sense apart from apologetics, hence the love affair with Edward Farley's mind. This may be because I am allergic to patriarchal authority and because I love the new as much as I love the old; my eye is always out for the glancing backside of the Divine that may be glimpsed in unexpected places. The nonconformist church with its emphasis on communal discernment and relative freedom to create is my chosen home.

But when push comes to shove, when pain or fear drive me past my limits, or when joy overflows, a thinking faith is insufficient. Then I go to the place where prayer has been valid,²⁷ to be a woman who kneels,²⁸ to shout with Job and to drink from the blessing cup. The stories, songs and prayers of God's people speak powerfully of human struggling and striving, of loving, longing and loss. Metaphor and visions end up meaning more than any rational explanation ever could. I need liminal space to make sense, to bear up, to create and be created.

Thank God for the borderlands.

²⁷ Eliot, T.S., *Little Gidding* (2001, 36).

²⁸ As Hillesum described herself (deCosta, 1998, 225).

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